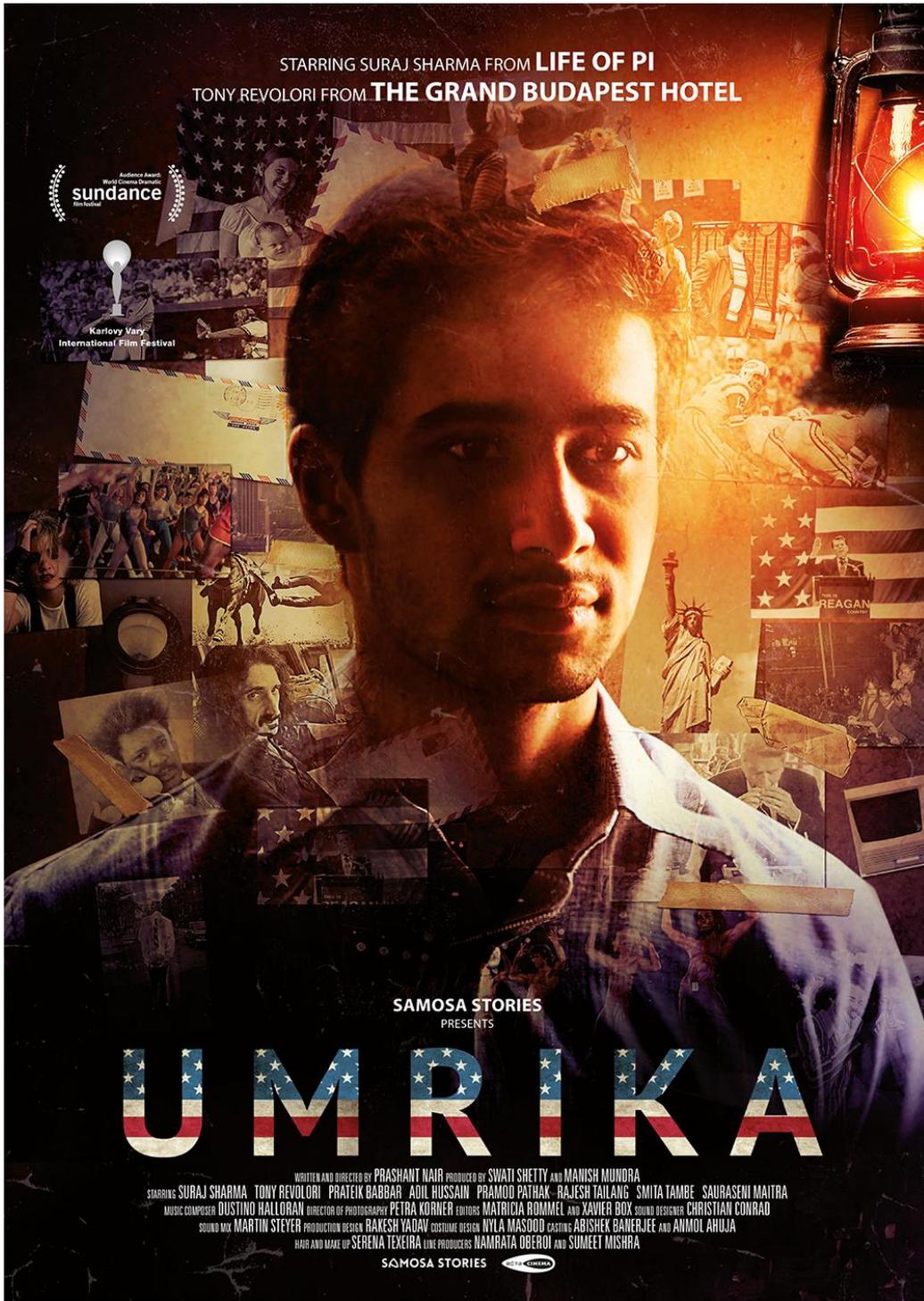




presents





# UMRIKA

*(Hindi for "America")*

**Written and Directed by**

Prashant Nair

**Produced by**

Swati Shetty & Manish Mundra

**Starring**

Suraj Sharma, Tony Revolori, Smita Tambe, Adil Hussain, Pramod Pathak, Rajesh Tailang, Amit Sial, Sauraseni Maitra, and Prateik Babbar

RT: 100 mins, Hindi with English Subtitles



Official Selection 2015  
**sundance**  
film festival



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## CAST

Suraj Sharma	“Ramakant” or “Rama,” the younger brother
Tony Revolori	“Lalu,” Ramakant’s best friend
Smita Tambe	“Ramakant’s Mother”
Adil Hussain	“Immigration Agent Patel”
Pramod Pathak	“Ramakant’s Father”
Rajesh Tailang	“Postman”
Amit Sial	“Rajan”
Sauraseni Maitra	“Radhika”
Prateik Babbar	“Udai,” Ramakant’s older brother

## CREW

Director	Prashant Nair
Screenplay	Prashant Nair
Production	Samosa Stories Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.
Producers	Swati Shetty, Manish Mundra
Director of Photography	Petra Korner
Editing	Xavier Box, Patricia Rommel
Costumes	Nyla Masood
Make-up	Serena Teixeira
Sound Designer	Christian Conrad
Sound Mix	Martin Steyer
Casting	Abhishek Banerjee, Anmol Ahuja
Original Music	Dustin O’Halloran
Shooting locations	Mumbai, Satara – India

## TECHNICAL DATA

Running time: approx.100 min  
Format: DCP  
Screen Ratio: 2,35:1  
Language: Hindi, with English subtitles

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

A small village in India is invigorated when one of their own travels to America (aka, **UMRIKA**) and details his adventures through letters home, sparking community debate and inspiring hope. But

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when the letters mysteriously stop coming, his younger brother Rama (**Suraj Sharma**) sets out on a journey to find him. With the help of his best friend Lalu (**Tony Revolori**), Rama retraces his brother's path to find himself charting one of his own. Set in the mid-1980s, **UMRIKA** is a funny and meaningful story of the lengths taken to realize one's dreams.

Written and Directed by Prashant Nair (*Delhi in a Day*), **UMRIKA** (Hindi for America) stars Suraj Sharma (*The Life of Pi*, *Million Dollar Arm*, season 4 of Showtime's *Homeland*) as Rama. Co-stars include Tony Revolori (SAG Awards nominee for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*), Smita Tambe, Adil Hussain, Rajesh Tailang & Prateik Babbar. Produced by Swati Shetty and Manish Mundra. Prashant Nair took "Umrika" through the Sundance Labs.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT** by Prashant Nair

### ORIGINS OF "UMRIKA"

My family is originally from Kerala, the southern-most state of India. But I was born in Chandigarh, a city up in the North, known mostly because it was designed from scratch by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier. Coincidentally, my parents, at the time, were living in Switzerland and had flown back to India with the sole purpose of ensuring I was born in what they hoped would later become "my country".

I spent the next twenty years living and attending schools in Switzerland, Sudan, Syria, Zambia, Austria and the US. Then, as an adult, I went on to live in New York (yes, it is a country of its own), France, the Czech Republic and Germany. I never ended up living in "my country". But somehow, they all became home.

UMRIKA was borne of a desire to explore two different but very inter-twined subjects that I have continuously been exposed to throughout my life.

Firstly, UMRKA is a story about how people end up in countries other than their own, sometimes for reasons that are far beyond their control and far beyond our imagination. I wanted to explore the subject of immigration but not in the way it is typically treated. Rather than focus on the trials and tribulations of immigrants and the struggles they face upon reaching their destination, I wanted to explore what happens up until the point the decision to immigrate is made: the origins and root of that phenomenon. I wanted to tell the story of someone who ends up leaving for another country but for reasons that have nothing to do with war, famine, economic desperation, persecution or greed. My character makes the decision to immigrate to America despite the fact that it was never his ambition. He does it for reasons that are so complex, so universal and at the very core of us all: He does it to earn the love of his mother.

The film is also about how cultures perceive each other and how something very normal in one part

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of the world can be perceived as unusual, even exotic, in another.

In each place I've lived in, I've always been confronted with stereotypes and misimpressions about the place I had just moved from. What I had just grown to accept as normal became immediately labelled as exotic in my new home. At the same time, it's impossible to deny the global influence that America holds on the rest of the world. In some ways, it was the one constant across all the places I lived. We'd watch "Dallas" in Damascus and then pick up where we left off in Lusaka.

Andy Warhol once said that "everybody has their own America, and then they have pieces of a fantasy America that they think is out there but they can't see... So the fantasy corners of America... You've pieced them together from scenes in movies and music and lines from books. And you live in your dream America that you've custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real one."

The inhabitants of tiny, remote Jitvapur village piece together their own idea of America based on the photos and letters that come from there. In doing so they form their own stereotypes, misimpressions and make assumptions about a far-off place in the manner that each of us does every day. Hopefully, watching them as they decipher these photographs leads us to question what is more exotic: Groundhog day or a Hindu temple? Mud wrestling or a Sikh turban? Hot dog eating competitions or fasting every Tuesday?

I wanted to make this film the same way I have lived my life: with people from different cultures, backgrounds, ideologies and beliefs. It's my strong belief that when such people come together and share ideas and gravitate around a common vision, their varied perspectives and approaches are channelled coherently into something that we hope will be truly universal, regardless of whether it is viewed in Qatar, Kreuzberg or Kolkata.

I do believe that, despite the fact this film is set in India, this is a story that could take place anywhere. The rural American kid who dreams of living in Paris one day shares much in common with the Ramakant of UMRKA.

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## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

### TIME PERIOD

We wanted to give the film a fable-like feeling so that it feels slightly abstracted from reality, almost like a document from the past and, occasionally, even a dream. After exploring a couple of options Petra, our DoP, and I agreed that the best format for such a movie would be film. We explored 35MM but quickly concluded that Super 16 would best provide what we were looking for. The grain and texture would help in a large way, preparing the audience for a journey and situating the film in the past. Unfortunately, film is dying fast in India and it was almost impossible to find reliable cameras that were well maintained as well as labs to process the film. Our producers boldly agreed and although we faced enormous logistical difficulties with shooting in Super 16, it's impossible now to imagine it any other way. I believe this might be one of the last few films to be shot on Super 16 in India. Sad, but true.

We also integrated a number of cultural references to give a sense of time. We didn't want the period to overwhelm the story and wanted to find a balance between the timelessness of a fable and yet a sense of where we are with regards to India's history and Ramakant's age. We decided to use Indian cultural landmarks and political events throughout and, only at one key junction, a key event from my childhood memories of the US: The explosion of the spaceship Challenger. The late 70s and the 80s in India were dominated by the Gandhi family and their Congress party as well as the Bollywood super-star Amitabh Bachchan. But a number of really interesting things also happened during that time: the government made colour TVs available widely in 1982 for the Asian Games, the first TV serial "Hum Log" created such a sensation that the streets were virtually empty when it aired, India had strong ties to the Soviet Union yet fascination for America was peaking in those years. Doordarshan TV aired a show called "Hot Tracks" which played the best of US hits every week, The advertising, radio shows, fashion. There were only four types of cars on the streets. We tried to include as much of all this as possible while ensuring it didn't overwhelm the film. Swati, our producer, spent months reaching out to music labels, brands, production houses and TV stations to obtain permission to use all the different elements you see in the film.

Another aspect is the soundtrack. Apart from the score, we have used licensed songs from that era to give a sense of time. Every single song included in the film has been inspired by an American song in some way or the other. From "Billie Jean" to "Rock You Baby," we wanted the soundtrack to be entirely composed of America-inspired songs and also to be true to the year in which they came out so it coincides exactly with the year it is supposed to be in the film.

### TWO WORLDS: THE VILLAGE AND THE CITY

In the film, there are two distinct worlds, that of the village and the city. Oftentimes you will see villages in India portrayed with an emphasis on poverty or caste. During our location scouts, we saw numerous villages and what struck us most is the sense of joy that we were greeted with. The

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hospitality, the smiles, the warmth – all this despite the comparative lack of material possessions. Sometimes, much more joy than you'd find in our cities. We wanted to capture that and give our village a certain dream-like quality to it, while making the city a much grittier place, almost in an ironic sense as many leave their villages to pursue dreams in the city. We decided we'd eliminate all cool colours from the village and leave just earthy, warm colours. Except these pale blue letters that would stand out as foreign objects. For the city, we decided to focus on cooler, colder colours and also tried to follow a pattern where the pale blue of the letters would slowly be more and more present in the film as Ramakant gets closer to his brother and America begins to take over his life. So, where in the beginning that pale blue is only visible on the letters and nowhere else, by the third act of the film, it overwhelms everything, almost as if it has jumped off the paper and overpowered Ramakant's world. The costume departments, production design team and our director of photography worked together with the location department to achieve this effect.

We also chose to shoot wider in the village and then tighter in the city, almost as if his world is more limited, even though he is in this vast city versus his tiny village. Mumbai is a city made up of hundreds of little "villages" and it's not rare to find people who have never ventured to the other side of the city in their entire life. Chawls, the structure in which Ramakant stays in when he comes to the city, are a dying example of structures that were made to accommodate immigrants coming to the city and that provided a sense of community within these huge, impersonal masses.

#### "UMRIKA"

As one of the themes of the film deals with what is exotic, we spent countless hours going through all the images available in Getty and Corbis libraries to shortlist the ones we felt would be most interesting to our characters and the village. The stranger things, the stuff you'd actually write home about. We felt the letters would begin on a practical note about roads and houses and how people in America live but then, as the years pass and these subjects became exhausted, they would get into cultural phenomenon and politics. As Ramakant becomes an expert about America, his letters would deal with more complex ideas. We also had to be careful to only select photos that were taken at least 12 months before the exact time it is supposed to be in the film when you see them. Much like what Andy Warhol says, these villagers would be piecing together their own "UMRIKA", creating a portrait of a foreign land through their own eyes. As the team worked through thousands of these images to shortlist the ones that finally made it into the film, I had the impression we too were piecing together our own "Umrika".

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## **INTERVIEW WITH WRITER & DIRECTOR PRASHANT NAIR**

### **What's your film about?**

A tiny Indian village begins to transform when letters start arriving from one of their own, describing the marvels and eccentricities of life in 1980s America.

### **Now what's it REALLY about?**

It's about the mythology of America and, more generally, how cultures perceive each other: the stereotypes, assumptions, misunderstandings and labelling as "exotic" of all things unfamiliar. The film playfully examines this through the eyes of a remote village in India who are forced to piece together a portrait of America through photographs and letters that they receive. In particular, two brothers whose lives are turned upside down by all this.

### **Tell us briefly about yourself.**

I was born in India but raised in Europe, Africa and Asia before going on to live and work in New York, Paris, Prague, Berlin and now Mumbai. This constant moving and exposure to different parts of the world is probably what has the biggest impact on the subjects I hope to explore through filmmaking.

I came to filmmaking relatively late, having worked in social media up until four years ago. My first film, the micro-budget "Delhi In A Day" served as film school for me. It had a limited theatrical release in India in 2012 and I was fortunate enough to be able to follow that up with being part of the inaugural Sundance Mumbai Mantra Screenwriting Lab in India, with the support of which I developed "Umrika."

### **Biggest challenge in completing this film?**

The film was originally set up as a French/German/Indian co-production but just weeks before production was to start, everything fell apart and the entire project was "indefinitely postponed". Swati Shetty then stepped in, and she and I sort of stubbornly decided to go ahead anyway, scraping together whatever we could from savings, friends and family. For most of the shoot, we'd wake up every morning not knowing if this would be the last day we could afford to shoot. Fortunately towards the end of the shoot and after knocking on almost every door in India, Swati finally met our other producer, Manish Mundra, over Twitter. And he agreed to come on board as a producer and finance the film as well. For a long time, it looked like we'd end up completely bankrupt, with an incomplete film and no friends left!

### **What do you want Sundance audience to take away from your film?**

Above all, I hope that they enjoy the ride and are able to immerse themselves in the world we've created, even if it's one that's quite distant from their own.

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Beyond that, if the film encourages people to think about how they perceive cultures other than their own, the stereotypes and assumptions that we regularly make ... it would be very rewarding.

### **Any films inspire you?**

Plenty. For *Umrika*, in particular, because the film takes place in the 80s, I ended up watching a ton of cheesy Bollywood movies from the 80s I would otherwise never have seen. Southern Italy has certain similarities to India, so I enjoyed watching some of Tornatore's films again and also revisited Ettore Scola films and a few of the *Commedia all'italiana* classics for tone.

### **What's next?**

Nothing is concrete just yet but have just finished up my first draft of a comedy/drama that takes place in an Indian airport that is falling apart and about to be decommissioned.

Also working on a dark comedy about a couple that escapes big city life to paradise in order to pursue spirituality, healthy living and "freedom". Both are being developed with Samosa Stories, the production company that produced "*Umrika*".

### **What cameras did you shoot on?**

We shot Super 16. Arri 416 with Cooke S4 lenses. The film takes place from 1975-1986 so we wanted it to have that texture and feel. Sadly, it might be one of the last films to be shot on Super 16 in India as almost all the labs have shut down.

### **Did you crowdfund? If so, via what platform. If not, why?**

Unfortunately not, unless you count friends and family. Crowdfunding is still in its infancy in India and, at the time, there were a number of regulatory issues to be resolved. But we definitely hope to in the future.

(Source: *IndieWire's* Meet the Filmmaker Sundance Series)

## **CAST**

### **Suraj Sharma -- Ramakant, the younger brother**

Suraj Sharma who made his acting debut in Ang Lee's hugely successful film '*Life of Pi*', is an Indian boy who got discovered by Ang when he accompanied his brother for the audition of *Pi*. He has then acted in Disney's '*Million Dollar Arm*' followed by a significant role in the 4th season of the successful television series *Homeland*. Suraj is studying filmmaking at NYU, and is keen on pursuing his career in acting.

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#### **Prateik Babbar -- Ramakant's brother, Udai**

Prateik Babbar is an Indian actor who has worked in films like 'Dhobi Ghaat' (Mumbai Diaries) and 'Jaane Tu ya Jaane na'. He is the son of erstwhile poster girl of Indian Independent cinema Smita Patil, who worked with Satyajit Ray in Sadgati and with Shyam Benegal in films like Manthan and Bhumika.

#### **Tony Revolori -- Lalu, Ramakant's best friend**

Tony Revolori is best known for his role as 'Zero Moustafa' in Wes Anderson's "The Grand Budapest Hotel". Born and raised in Anaheim California, Tony is of Guatemalan-Italian descent. He started acting at the age of two. Tony has acted in two films that are in competition at Sundance 2015, Dope and Umrika. Tony is currently shooting for Sony's 'The Fifth Wave'.

#### **Smita Tambe -- Ramakant's Mother**

Smita Tambe is an Indian (Marathi language) actor of great repute. She has worked extensively in Marathi plays and films and has won multiple awards for her exceptional performances. She has been much appreciated within the Indian industry for her films 'Jogwa' and '72 miles'.

#### **Adil Hussain -- Immigration Agent Patel**

Adil Hussain is an Indian stage, television and film actor from the eastern Indian state of Assam who acts in mainstream Hindi cinema as well as independent films. He has had key roles in international films like Mira Nair's The Reluctant Fundamentalist and Ang Lee's Life of Pi.

#### **Rajesh Tailang -- Postman**

Rajesh Tailang is an Indian stage and film actor, and writer who has worked in films like Dev and Amal. His latest drama Siddharth was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival 2013.

#### **Pramod Pathak - Father**

Pramod is a theatre / film actor and director who has acted in over 20 plays. Pramod enjoys working with children, and he has been working with underprivileged kids living in various shelters, using theatre as process for rehabilitation. He conducts workshops for children in need of care and protection, and children in conflict with the law in a state-run observation home in Mumbai.

#### **Amit Sial -- Rajan**

Born and raised in Kanpur, India, Amit Sial discovered acting at the age of eight, and since then, has appeared in numerous stage productions across India, including in particular the lead role of Tim Supple's adapted version of Salman Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories, directed by noted Mumbai-based experimental theatre director, Neeraj Kabi. Amit's recent film Titli was selected and screened in Uncertain Regard at Cannes 2014.

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### **Sauraseni Maitra -- Radhika**

Sauraseni is a young girl from Kolkatta who played a child actress in the film Chittagong in 2012. She is still pursuing her studies, and wants to move to Mumbai to pursue an acting career immediately after her graduation.

## **CREW**

### **Director – Prashant Nair**

Indian-born French writer-director Prashant Nair spent his childhood in Switzerland, Sudan, Syria, Zambia and Austria. He trained as an engineer, and was a social media entrepreneur for 12 years, living in New York, Prague and Paris. His first film, the micro-budget "Delhi in a Day", released theatrically in India in 2012 and was voted one of the top ten independent films of 2012 by Times of India. It received several awards and went to over thirty film festivals. "Umrika", his second film, was developed in the Mumbai Mantra | Sundance Screenwriter's lab and was a finalist for the Sundance Mahindra Global Filmmaking award. It was also a recipient of a grant from the Sundance Feature Film program.

### **Producer – Swati Shetty**

Born and raised in Mumbai, Swati is a qualified pharmacist and MBA by education. She worked for Fox (Star TV) and Disney for several years on the business side of television, before heading Disney Studios in India. She then moved on to head a local Indian major Balaji Motion Pictures where she put together a slate of films and led the team through one of its best fiscal years. She founded Samosa Stories two years ago, and Umrika is her first film as a producer.

### **Producer – Manish Mundra**

Manish Mundra is a Management Graduate (MBA) in Finance and Marketing from University of Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. He has over 17 years of professional experience in the business of Petrochemicals, Cement, Ceramic Insulators, Fertilizer, Ammonia, Copper Smelter, Copper Mines, and Aluminum across six countries. Manish Mundra is the Managing Director at Petrochemical giant Indorama, and is based in Nigeria. Manish is a passionate lover of films and after achieving success professionally, is now focussed on helping create good cinema in India. He has already produced and released his first film "Ankhon Dekhi" which has been critically acclaimed for its simplicity. In a short span of two-three years, Manish has already committed to more than 8 other projects in the indie space through Indian Cinema.

## **WORLD SALES – Beta Cinema**

Beta Cinema has established itself as a "boutique-operation" for independent feature films with strong theatrical potential. Beta Cinema's philosophy is to keep its selective acquisition policy of 10 to 12 titles per year in order to fully develop the theatrical potential of each title according to its individual character.

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Beta Cinema's portfolio includes outstanding productions like the international box office hit THE PHYSICIAN, Berlin 2014 Silver Bear-winning STATIONS OF THE CROSS, Berlin 2013 Golden Bear-winning CHILD'S POSE, Academy Award 2011-nominated IN DARKNESS, Cannes 2008 Jury Prize-winning and Academy Award-nominated IL DIVO, Academy Award 2007-winning THE COUNTERFEITERS, Academy Award 2007 nominated MONGOL, Academy Award 2006-winning THE LIVES OF OTHERS and the Academy Award 2004-nominated DOWNFALL

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