

The 24th Spirit of Fire International Festival of Cinematic Debuts Announces Program and Jury

Spirit of Fire is a leading festival of debut cinema in Russia and internationally, and one of the key platforms for emerging filmmakers. **The festival takes place annually in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia.** It was founded in 2002 by People's Artist of the Russian Federation and film director Sergey Solovyov, who served as its permanent president for almost twenty years. Since 2023, the festival's president has been world-renowned filmmaker Emir Kusturica.

The thematic focus of the 2026 edition is **“Children in Cinema.”** The program highlights the role of children's and family content as a national priority, the importance of film and animation in shaping the values and worldview of younger generations, as well as the search for new artistic forms and sustainable industry models within the children's and family film sector.

In 2026, the festival received **630 submissions from 39 countries**, once again confirming the strong international interest in the Spirit of Fire and its key programs.

A total of **52 films** were submitted to the international competition, **464** to the short film competition, **83** to the Russian debut competition, and **31** to the **“Your Cinema”** program.

Submissions came from **Australia, Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Hungary, Ghana, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Israel, India, Indonesia, Iran, Spain, Italy, Kazakhstan, Canada, Qatar, China, Colombia, Cuba, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Nepal, the Netherlands, the UAE, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Sudan, the United States, Tunisia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, France, Switzerland, and South Africa.**

OPENING FILM

The festival will open with the film **“The Man Who Saw the Bear Who Saw the Man”** by **Pierre Richard**, presented by **Okko and Sreda**. In the film, Pierre Richard acts as **director, screenwriter, and lead actor**.

The story follows Grégoire, an elderly hermit played by Pierre Richard, who seems to have understood everything about life and human nature. Having grown tired of the world, he withdraws to a lonely cabin somewhere in the south of France. It seems that nothing could surprise him anymore. However, a chance meeting with **Michel (Timi-Joy Marbot)**, a young man with Asperger's

syndrome, turns his life upside down. Michel and Grégoire become close friends, bonding over their love of nature, and together they try to save a huge bear that has escaped from a traveling circus and is frightening local residents and authorities.

JURY

LU WEI

China

PRESIDENT OF THE JURY

An influential internationally known Chinese scriptwriter. His works re distinguished for their historical insight, compelling dramatic structure and modern transformation of local narratives. For a long time he collaborated with the 5th generation Chinese directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Together they created films that elevated Chinese cinema to the world level. In 1993 the film he wrote “Farewell My Concubine” directed by Chen Kaige won the Palme d’Or of the Cannes Film Festival. Up to now it is the only Chinese-language film crowned with this distinction. In 1994 the film “To Live” written by him and directed by Zhang Yimou won the Grand Prix of the Jury of the Cannes Film Festival. Later he wrote such films as “Red Cherry”, “Tuya’s Marriage”, “Wolf Totem” and many others.

NDAMO DAMARISE

Cameroon

Celebrated actress, filmmaker, and humanitarian whose illustrious career in the entertainment industry has earned her global acclaim and positioned her as a transformative figure in Cameroon and beyond. A Certified Actor & Filmmaker from New York Film Academy, she also holds a Bachelor’s degree in English and French communication studies from the University of Buea, Cameroon. Renowned for her powerful performances, she starred in the critically acclaimed Netflix films “The Fisherman’s Diary” and “Strangers”, solidifying her status as a leading actress. She has also featured in a couple of Hollywood movies like “Till Death”, “Shaapith” and “Kamaria”. Her extraordinary talent has garnered her numerous awards in homeland and abroad. Her works are featured on major platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Canal Plus, ShowMax. She has also gained global recognition on media outlets and magazine covers such as Al Jazeera, Cameroon Tribute, Guardian Post, The Info Newspaper, etc. Beyond her acting achievements, she is a dedicated advocate for social issues, has

collaborated with notable organizations, including PEP Africa, and the United Nations, to organize impactful campaigns addressing pressing societal challenges. As an acting instructor, she has hosting master classes. She is a former communications director at HIBMAT University and facilitator for GIZ Cameroon workshops.

JAIME CRISTIAN NOGUERA MARTÍN

Spain

Film festival director, film critic and writer with more than 25 years of experience in international film festivals, cultural programming and audiovisual production. Founder and director of the Benalmádena International Film Festival since 1998. Specialized in European cinema, documentary film and genre cinema. Regular international jury member at film festivals in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Eurasia. Author and editor of numerous books on cinema and culture, and screenwriter and producer of award-winning short and feature films.

GORAN RADOVANOVIĆ

Serbia

Writer, director, and producer. Born in Belgrade in 1957. Graduated in art history from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in 1982. Between 1977 and 1980, he sojourned in Munich on a scholarship awarded by the Goethe Institute. After his return to Belgrade, he worked as a writer and director of both feature and documentary films. A retrospective of his documentary films took place in Havana, Vienna, and Athens. He worked as a guest professor at EICTV (International Film and Television School), San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, VGIK (Moscow), Oberlin College (Ohio, USA), ESAP (Escola Superior Artística do Porto), Portugal, and other institutions. His films have been screened and awarded at numerous film festivals worldwide. His film “The Erl-King” (2024) won main prizes at the Zabaikalsky IFF in Chita, the Golden Knight IFF in Sevastopol, the IFF Eurasian Bridge in Yalta (Russia), the IFF for Youth and Children in Isfahan (Iran), Religion Film Today in Trento (Italy). He also won Brilliant Butterfly Award for Best Director in Moscow for “The Erl-King”. His directorial filmography also includes “Second Circle” (1998, doc.), “My Country – For Internal Use Only”, “Model House” (2000, doc.), “OTPOR: The Fight to Save Serbia” (2001, doc.), “Casting” (2003, doc.), “Chicken Elections” (2005, docu fiction), “The Ambulance” (2009), “With

Fidel Whatever Happens” (2011, docudrama), “Enclave” (2015), “The Makavejev Case or Trial in a Movie Theater” (2019, docu fiction), “Waiting for Handke” (2021, doc.), “Lubarda, May a Raven Befall thy Home” (in production), etc.

YULIANA SLASCHEVA

Russia

Born in Moscow. Graduated from the Moscow Humanitarian and Social Academy (currently Moscow Humanitarian University), department of marketing, majoring in economics, marketing, PR. In 2013–2016 she was the CEO of the CTC Media Holding. Since 2017 she is the chairman of the board of directors of the Soyuzmultfilm Studio, since 2018 – chairman of the board of directors of the Association of Animation Films, since 2019 – CEO of the Gorky Film Studio. Since 2024 she is a member of the Presidential Council for Culture. Member of the board of directors of ROSKINO as well as of the Russian segment of the BRICS Women’s Business Alliance. Winner of numerous awards for achievements in media business. In 2021 she was awarded with the badge “For Contribution to Russian Culture” from the Ministry of Culture of Russia. In 2023 she was awarded with the honorary medal “185 Years of the Department of State Property of Russia” for the effective management of state property in Russia. Her producer filmography includes such well-known projects as “Orange Cow”, “Prostokvashino” (2018, series), “Checkered Zebra” (2020, series), “Mighty Paws”, “Just You Wait!” (2021, series), “Umka” (2022, series), “Detective Chirp & the Golden Beehive”, “Detektor”, “Kukolnik”, “Chebi: My Fluffy Friend” (2022), “Yolki-Igolki” (2022), “Princesses. Fairy Voice”, “Vera”, “How I Met Her Mother”, “Chizhik-Pyzhik is Back”, “Ruler of the Wind” (2023), “The Sound of Youth”, “The Flying Ship”, “Guest from the Future” (2024), “Fredonia: The Movie”, “Cheburashka 2” (2025) and others.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

SORDA/DEAF

Spain / 2025 / 99 min. / color / stereo

Ángela, a deaf woman, is expecting a child with her hearing partner, Héctor. The baby’s arrival disrupts their relationship, forcing Ángela to face the challenges of raising her daughter in a world not made for her.

EVA LIBERTAD GARCÍA LÓPEZ Screenwriter, director, and sociologist with a degree from the Complutense University of Madrid. Her short film “Sorda”, co-directed with Nuria Muñoz Ortín, was nominated for the 2023 Goya Awards. Her filmography also includes “Mentiste Amanda” (2023), co-directed with Nuria Muñoz Ortín, which won Best Short Film at Medina del Campo and was a contender for the 2025 Goya Awards. As a playwright, she has written and directed theatrical works for independent companies and institutions such as the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain), the Autonomous University of Querétaro, INDESOL and SEDESOL (Mexico). “Deaf” is her debut as a feature film director.

DOOR DAR MIANEH SHARGH/FAR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE EAST

Iran – Austria / 2025 / 103 min. / Color / 5.1

On the eve of her separation from Arash, and hesitating between staying in Iran and leaving it, Sogand comes to one of the southern cities of the country to make her first feature film. At the same time, an exhibition of works from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is being held in the complex where the group is staying. In the pre-production process, Sogand chooses Zahra – a local southern girl – instead of Negar, who was introduced to the group by Arash, to play the main role in the film, and starts rehearsing with her despite Arash’s strong opposition. In the meantime, Negar realizes that Zahra ran away from home because her father disapproved of her acting, and that Zahra now plans to leave the country. Negar gets Zahra’s father’s number at any cost. Filming begins. Sogand is fully focused on her work, unaware that Ali – one of the exhibition attendants – is planning to steal a painting by disrupting the filming and taking advantage of the crowd, and that Zahra’s father is on his way to get her.

Director & scriptwriter ARASH ANEESSEE

ARASH ANEESSEE Born in 1981 in Shiraz, Iran, he obtained his bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering in 2006. In 2011, he completed the master’s program in film directing at Tehran University of Art. He is the director of several short films and documentaries. In 2021, he made his first feature film, “Maman”, which won awards at film festivals. “Far in the Middle of the East” is his second film.

SHI JIE RI CHU SHI/ALL QUIET AT SUNRISE

China / 2025 / 101 min. / Color / 5.1

Lucy, the world's most famous early human ancestor, is often called the "grandmother of mankind". Graduate student Ma Ke is writing a linguistic thesis on Lucy, who he believes possesses the earliest human language skills. Professor Li Tong, while questioning Ke's argument, finds a clue in his paper that explains her daughter's disappearance. As Ma Ke grapples with his writing and reality, his mother, Haiyan, suddenly frequents his life. Haiyan leads Ke to the ancient and dilapidated house she has bought, and as they explore its mysteries, her innermost secrets and wishes gradually surface. Meanwhile, Ma Ke finds his own life blending with the world depicted in his thesis. Lucy's figure emerges, shimmering with the call of love in her howl.

Director & scriptwriter ZHU XIN

ZHU XIN Born in 1996 in Hangzhou, graduated from the China Academy of Art. His debut film "Vanishing Days" (2018) was selected for the New Currents Competition at the Busan IFF and the Forum section of the Berlin IFF. His documentary feature "A Song River" (2024) received the Youth Jury Award and Cinephile Award at the Pingyao IFF. "All Quiet at Sunrise" is his second feature film.

A VIDA LUMINOSA/ THE LUMINOUS LIFE

Portugal – France / 2025 / 99 min. / color

Springtime in Lisbon and Nicolau turns 24, but doesn't celebrate. Living at his parents' house, hostage to a dream of becoming a musician that never comes true and trapped in the ideal image of an ex-girlfriend who left him a year ago and never came back, Nicolau feels unable of moving forward and inventing a life of his own. He takes odd jobs that don't allow him to leave his parents' house, until the day he discovers that his mother is just as unsatisfied with her life as he is. Nicolau is shaken, but doesn't fall. On the contrary, he moves forward. He gets a job in a stationery store, moves in to a shared house, and life starts rolling again. And with life, his dreams and his heart. Up ahead, a girl and an island.

Director & scriptwriter JOÃO ROSAS

JOÃO ROSAS Born in 1981. He is the author of three collections of short stories and various documentaries and short films, such as "My Mother is a Pianist" (2005), "Birth of a City" (2009), "Entrecampos" (2012), "Maria do Mar" (2015), premiered in Locarno IFF and prizewinner in Portugal, Spain and Brazil, and "Catavento" (2020), which won the prize for best short film at BAFICI 2021 and a special mention from the jury at the Festival du Cinéma de

Brive. His latest documentary, “Death of a City” (2022), won the DocAlliance Award 2023 for best feature. “The Luminous Life” is his first feature-length fiction film.

THE COIN

Italy – Serbia / 2025 / 79 min. / color + b&w / stereo

Carlo is a bum who suffers of recurrent nightmares. He lives by the rule of the coin, tossing the very same coin over and over again to take every single decision of his life. Coin after coin he arrives in L’Aquila, a city hit by an earthquake. Here he becomes involved in a gruesome murder case. With the help of Marta, an alcoholic woman he met on the road, he starts an investigation which will soon have a metaphysical perspective.

Director EMILIANO DANTE

EMILIANO DANTE Experimental filmmaker and multimedia artist born in L’Aquila, Italy. His main works before “The Coin” are the feature fiction “Omission” (2012) and the trilogy of experimental documentaries about the earthquake “ In the Blue” (2009), “Habitat – Personal Notes” (2014) and “Apennine” (2017).

LA NOCHE ESTÁ MARCHÁNDOSE YA/ NIGHT IS FADING AWAY

Argentina / 2025 / 104 min. / B&W / 5.1

Pelu, in his thirties, is the modest projectionist of a municipal film club. Faced with the crisis, he must become the cinema’s night watchman and over time, it turns into his new home. Little by little, a small community begins to take shape inside the cinema after closing hours. It consists of a group of “naranjitas” (informal parking attendants) who sleep there and, eventually, become his closest friends, along with Vale, a former classmate who uses the space to record OnlyFans videos. The precarious economic conditions in which they live are also part of a broader crisis that threatens to shut down the cinema and put their small community at risk.

Directors, scriptwriter & camera EZEQUIEL SALINAS, RAMIRO SONZINI

EZEQUIEL SALINAS Born in Córdoba in 1985. Filmmaker and director of photography. He directed the short films “Suquía” (2019) and “Mi última aventura” (2021) co-directed with Ramiro Sonzini.

RAMIRO SONZINI Born in Córdoba in 1989. Filmmaker, editor, and film critic. He co-directed the short film “Mi última aventura” (Best Film at the

International Competition BAFICI, Silver Spike SEMINCI 2021) with Ezequiel Salinas.

SONGS OF THE MOON KING

Russia / 2026 / 60 min. / color / stereo

After a mystic ceremony in the forest the girl wakes up in a house without windows, where a cult, isolated from the sun, resides. Their only source of light is the sacred icon windows producing artificial light. The protagonist will undergo the rite of initiation and meet their dying king to escape from the house.

Director, scriptwriter & designer NASTASYA LAPSHINA

NASTASYA LAPSHINA Born in Yekaterinburg, currently resides in the Moscow region. Intermedia artist specializing in cinema, painting and experimental costumes. Studied at the St. Petersburg School of New Cinema, participated in exhibitions of the School of Engaged Art and various film festivals. Member of the Cinema Association “Luch”. Curator of the master class of the foundation “Life Journey”. Her filmography also includes “Topography of Memory” (2024, doc.), “White Earth, Black Air” (2025, short).

SHAPE OF MOMO

India / 2025 / 115 min. / Color / 5.1

Bishnu, 32, returns to her ancestral Himalayan village after quitting her city job, only to face mounting family pressures and rigid societal expectations. Awaiting her are her grandmother, who hopes her son will return from Dubai; her mother, eager to see Bishnu settled and married and her pregnant sister Junu, who has come seeking refuge due to tensions at her in-laws’ home. As old conflicts resurface with Junu’s arrival and a tentative relationship develops with Gyan, a “suitable” local architect, Bishnu is caught between tradition and her desire for independence. Navigating this fragile web of expectations and defiance, she must choose whether to conform or forge her own path.

Director TRIBENY RAI

TRIBENY RAI Filmmaker from Sikkim. Her work explores female experience within the layered landscapes of the Eastern Himalayas. “Shape of Momo” is her debut feature.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION PROGRAM OF FILMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH “YOUR CINEMA”

BIRD BOY

South Africa – USA / 75 min. / 2025 / color

August, a recently orphaned city kid, is dumped on a remote farm in South Africa to be cared for by distant relatives. Having been “handed off” to a half-dozen prior foster parents, August is guarded and withdrawn. Discovering a large, abandoned egg gives the troubled boy a newfound sense of purpose. The hatched egg soon grows into Kobus, a towering, 350-pound ostrich with a big heart and small brain. Boy and bird become best friends. When ostrich is taken away, August risks everything to get him back.

Director & scriptwriter JOEL SOISSON

JOEL SOISSON With a background in fine art and cinematography, he began his career producing such indie faves as “Trick or Treat”, “A Nightmare on Elm Street 2” and “Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure”. Over the course of more than 50 feature films as a writer, director and producer, he has helped launch numerous multi-picture franchises including “American Yakuza” with Viggo Mortensen, “The Prophecy” with Christopher Walken, “Dracula 2000” with Gerard Butler and “Pulse” with Kristen Bell. He turned to family fare with “Buffalo Rider “ and “Bird Boy”.

MOUNTAIN BOY

UAE / 2024 / 93 min. / color

Live-action feel good family adventure feature film based on the award-winning UAE children’s book The Boy Who Knew the Mountains by Michele Ziolkowski. Suhail is a young Emirati Boy with Autism shunned by his family and villagers who do not understand his disability. Suhail retreats to the Mountains of Fujairah where he lives alone. Inspired to find his destiny, Suhail ventures out with his new friend Barakah, the Arabian Saluki to find acceptance, family and redemption.

Director ZAINAB SHAHEEN

ZAINAB SHAHEEN Emirati director. Born in Fujairah. Her previous short films include “Journey of Hope”, “Dates to Mars”, “Fujairah Vlog”, and “UAE 2071” was recently nominated for the Grand Prize at the OKO International Ethnographic Film Festival. She has also worked with the British Council on an international collaboration with Manchester Metropolitan University,

spotlighting her game development, social media, and digital filmmaking experience. “Mountain Boy” is her feature film debut.

MY TAIGA VACATION / МЭХЭЭЛЭЧЭЭН БУЛЧУТ

Russia / 2026 / 90 min. / color

The first Yakut film with talking animals based on the writings of the combat veteran Timofey Smetanin and the teacher Yakov Struchkov. The wise hunter Mekheelecheen decides to show to his spoilt grandson Mishuk the real value of nature. When the boy and his faithful dog Sergekh get lost in the woods, they meet a magic deer who endows Mishuk with the ability to understand the animal language. Now the characters will join forces with the inhabitants of the taiga to save the deer from poachers and discover the world where magic goes hand in hand with reality.

Director ALEXANDER LUKIN

ALEXANDER LUKIN Director, producer, composer. Born in 1982 in Yakutia, USSR. Graduated from the department of directing at the St. Petersburg State Institute of Cinema and TV (class of I.Maslennikov). His first film, “State Children” (2015), won the Golden Crane Award for best debut at the Amur Autumn IFF. His directorial filmography also includes “Magic Melody” (2016), “White Angel of Tundra” (2021), “Bugun-Bylyr” (2022), etc.

SEEDS / SEMILLAS

Colombia – Spain / 2025 / 100 min. / color

Shaira, a girl from the eastern plains of Colombia, dreams of participating in a coleo festival (an event similar to a rodeo). But after a recent drought severely damaged the crops, Shaira’s grandfather sells her horse without telling her. One day, he tells Shaira that the reason why some clouds take the shape of animals is that the sky traps them and won’t return them until it rains again. Shaira embarks on a journey to go in search of a special seed that will make the heavens rain again to bring her horse back.

Director & scriptwriter ELIANA NIÑO

ELIANA NIÑO Director, screenwriter, and film producer. She earned a Master’s degree in Cinéma, Réalisation et Création at the University Paris 8 in France. She is the director of “Heroines and Villains”, a collective that seeks to strengthen the craft of women screenwriters. She wrote and directed the short film “Bajo el Jardín”, winner of multiple awards at national and international festivals. “Seeds” is her first feature film.

I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A BOOK / VÉLETLENÜL ÍRTAM EGY KÖNYVET

Director & scriptwriter NÓRA LAKOS

Hungary – the Netherlands / 2024 / 98 min. / color

Nina is only 12, but she already knows she wants to be a writer – and a famous one! The problem is, her little brother is sick to death of hearing her stories every night. Nina turns to the famous writer next door for writing lectures. Meanwhile, for the first time in her father's life – after a long period of mourning – a serious love affair begins. This is where Nina's true novel begins. She starts searching for her mother's memory, and suddenly finds her life turning into a book full of twists and turns, with all her friends and family members as characters. Will the power of writing help her cope with loss and open her heart to a new family member and first love?

NÓRA LAKOS Budapest-based writer, director, and producer. Earlier in her career, she directed several short films, including “Edina”, which won awards at prestigious film festivals. Passionate about creating content for young audiences, she founded Cinemira – Hungary's first international children's and youth film festival – in 2018. Her debut feature film, “Cream”, a 2020 comedy release, went on to win numerous awards worldwide. It was later acquired by both HBO and Netflix. Her second feature, “I Accidentally Wrote a Book”, became the most-watched live-action family film in Hungary after its 2025 release.

PROGRAM FROM THE CUBAN REPUBLIC

The International Media Education Film Festival MICE Cuba and its program director Daimelis Monzon Wat present animation films made at the Animation studio of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC)

MUNDO SUMERGIDO

Cuba / 2013 / 11 min. / color

Director ALIEN MÁ

EL PASTOR DE NUBES

Cuba / 2015 / 6 min. / color

Directors INGRID CASTELLANOS &

ALEJANDRO SANTOMÉ

LOS DOS PRÍNCIPES

Cuba / 2017 / 15 min. / color

Directors YEMELÍ CRUZ & ADANOE LIMA

ECO

Cuba / 2020 / 5 min. / color

Director DAVID RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA

TU ESTRELLA

Cuba / 2022 / 6 min. / color

Director HENRY DE ARMAS

Spot 3. MI CUERPO ES MIO

Cuba / 2024 / 2 min. / color

Director IVETTE AVILA MARTIN

Spot 2. HIPERSEXUALIZACION INFANTIL

Cuba / 2024 / 2 min. / color

Director IVETTE AVILA MARTIN