



# — TO THE NORTH

79  
MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA  
Official Selection  
1932  2022

A Film by Mihai Mincan

PRESSKIT



# — TO THE NORTH

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GREECE, BULGARIA,  
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# — SYNOPSIS

Based on a true story. 1996, open sea.

During his shift on a transatlantic ship's deck, Joel, a religious Filipino sailor, discovers Dumitru, a Romanian stowaway hidden between some containers.

If he is spotted by the Taiwanese officers running the vessel, Dumitru is at risk to be thrown overboard. Joel decides to hide him, as a sign of his gratitude towards God.

Soon, a dangerous cat and mouse game begins. When his crew, his own friends, even God itself start to turn their backs on him, Joel learns that he has to face his cruel destiny alone.

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# A CONVERSATION WITH MIHAI MINCAN



## **What is the starting point for to the north?**

A short conversation I had with my DP. He mentioned this story, telling me that he heard it some years before, in a radio news broadcast. He had forgotten most of the details, but the story had stuck in his mind, more like a curiosity. He did, however, remember that there was a Bible involved. This “Bible” aspect is what actually drove me away from the subject. I ignored it at that moment, as I didn’t feel it as something that really spoke to me. However, two years later I remember the story, for no apparent reason. I started searching and reading about it for the next year or so. By that time, the story for me became one about the lack of communication between people, the feeling of being trapped and that somebody else is controlling your life. A story about loneliness and fear. That moment I knew it was the film I had always wanted to do.

**The film is fully shot on a huge vessel. The boat becomes the playground for our protagonists. It almost feels like a western. How did you manage the principal photography?**

Actually, shooting in that location was one of the main reasons for which I decided I would direct this film. It offered two possibilities I was very interested in. First, it was an almost metaphorical separation between inside and outside. Tight corridors and rooms VS the endless ocean: that was like a mirror for the “trapped VS free” theme I was interested in exploring. Second, given that the interiors were so tight, almost claustrophobic, it pushed us in finding ways to create movement inside narrow places. Usually, in many films, at least in the last 20 years or so, you don’t necessarily see characters going from one place to another. What you get is them just entering that place, or already being there, in action. What interested me a lot, and that is actually directly connected to this location, was exactly the way the characters

walk to and from a specific place. It seemed to me that, in this case, since they are trapped in a space, almost helpless, the way they cover the distance to another place on the ship is almost as important to what they are about to do in that place.

**How did you find the actors from all over the world?**

Traditional casting, mostly. I had the help of a great Romanian casting director who liked the project from the beginning and put her heart and soul into it. The hardest one to find was Niko Becker, the Romanian actor. I watched tens and tens of actors, before I discovered him, but I knew from that very moment that he was the one. I met the French actors also in a week-long casting session, for which I travelled to Paris. The trickiest ones were the actors from The Philippines. When we started the project, the budget was far from great, so we couldn’t afford to go to Manila and find them there. What I did was to lock myself in the house for a few weeks and watch every Filipino film from the last 5 years I could get my hands on. All three actors were chosen for Lav Diaz’s films. All of them blew me away in those films. I thought to myself, if they are good enough for Lav Diaz, a filmmaker that I admire, they will be alright for some unknown Romanian, with a strange project taking place on a ship. Fortunately, I wasn’t wrong.

**It can be seen as surprising to have a Romanian director directing Asian actors, how did you work on the set?**

I never thought of them as Asians. Since they knew great English and we could communicate, for me they were just normal actors and, by the end of the production, friends. We rehearsed for two weeks, before the start of the shooting. Although, “rehearsed” might not be the best word for it. What we would basically do was to talk a lot about individual scenes. I wanted them to understand the mood I was trying to create, what I was searching for in each scene. We spent almost two months together shooting and, every single day, all three of them were amazing. They were very friendly, everybody loved them. In terms of acting skills, they were in the stratosphere. The shooting was gruesome during some of these days, but they gave everything they had.

**The Sound is impressive and seems like a full character in the film. Could you explain us a bit more how you worked?**

It all started during a scouting trip we made while preparing for *To the North*. We were on board on a large ship, very similar to the one from the film. The minute the main engine was turned on, a huge wall of sound invaded the space and stayed there for days and days. From the huge uproar of the engine room, to the metallic sounds from the deck, then to the noise that your own footsteps make when walking on the plastic covered corridors of the ship, it all seemed a universe on its own. Even more fascinating, all those sounds seemed like loops from musical fragments, perfectly defined from a rhythmic point of view, tone and even melody. It appeared as a musical world of its own. Shortly after this trip, while I was in Paris, I met Nicholas Becker, who would end up creating the sound design for the film. At that time, he had just read the script and was beaming with

excitement and passion. He wanted to be a part of the project. Three years later, we would end up working in his little studio, in Paris, eight hours a day of crazy sounds, textures, and soundscapes. Nicholas created a beautiful universe of its own. Almost everything you hear while watching *To the North* is a trademark of his unique vision.

**The film depicts three visions of good and evil, linked to religion, or not. What is your view on this?**

I had no intention to express my view on “good VS evil” in a film. What I was really interested in exploring was this grey area, between the two concepts. That’s to say that I wasn’t concerned with what the characters are actually saying, but to how they are showing what they think it’s good or bad. Personally, I identify myself with parts of each of those three visions. And I think that’s natural, since our definitions of “good” and “evil” are not personal, but created, for years and years, in a very specific social and cultural environment. This environment - parents, school, religion, poverty or wealth - made these two notions very fluid. Sometimes these different visions meet, sometimes they devour each other. So, it wasn’t so much about working with concepts, or trying to analyze “good” and “evil”. What really interested me was that almost all of the characters from the film are fathers. While writing the script, I kept asking myself: “What’s this man going to tell his children about what is good and bad in this world?”. “How is he teaching his children to protect themselves in front of everyday evil?”, “Or to be good and kind to another human?”. That’s what drove me: people, not concepts.



# — BIOGRAPHY

# MIHAI MINCAN

*Director*

Mihai Mincan has graduated from the University of Philosophy in Bucharest in 2002, followed by an MBA degree from the University of Poitiers. Since 2004, for 12 years, he's been working as journalist at some of Romania's biggest newspapers and magazines. In 2008, he wrote his first script - the short film *The Palm Lines*, which was selected at Locarno, Rotterdam, Cottbus. He wrote and directed or co-directed, two short animations, three short films and two documentaries, which premiered at festivals from Europe and Romania, while also working as a scriptwriter for other Romanian filmmakers. *To the North* is his debut feature.



# — FILMOGRAPHY

# MIHAI MINCAN

2022	TO THE NORTH (Feature)
2019	THE MAN WHO WOULD BE FREE (Documentary)
2019	Emigrant Blues: a Road Movie in 2 1/2 Chapters (Documentary)
2017	The Comet (Short)
2015	Bondoc (Documentary) (Co-director)
2014	ALASKA (Short)
2014	LOVE BUS: CINCI POVESTI DE DRAGOSTE DIN BUCURESTI (SEGMENT «DRUMUL TABEREI»)

# CAST

Dumitru	Niko BECKER
Joel	Soliman CRUZ
Allan	Bart GUINGONA
Officer Chen	Olivier HO HIO HEN (Stillwater)
Captain Tsai	Alexandre NGUYEN

# CREW

<b>Director</b>	Mihai MINCAN
<b>Screenplay</b>	Mihai MINCAN
<b>Director of photography</b>	George CHIPER-LILLEMARK
<b>Assistant director</b>	Ciprian NISTORESCU
<b>Production &amp; Costume Designer</b>	Iulia FULICEA
<b>Editing</b>	Dragoș APETRI
<b>Sound Design</b>	Nicolas BECKER ( <i>Sound of Metal - Oscar for Best Sound</i> )
<b>Sound Mix</b>	Cyril HOLTZ ( <i>3 Cesar awards, latest for The Sister Brothers</i> )
<b>Music</b>	Marius LEFTĂRACHE
	Alessandro CORTINI ( <i>Nine Inch Nails</i> )
	Nicolas BECKER ( <i>Sound of Metal - Oscar for Best Sound</i> )
<b>Casting</b>	Florentina BRATFANOF
	Tatiana VIALLE
<b>Production</b>	deFilm
	Remora Films
	StudioBauhaus
	Screening Emotions
	Background Films
<b>Producer</b>	Radu STANCU
	Ioana LASCĂR
	Cyriac AURIOL
	Konstantinos VASSILAROS
	Poli ANGELOVA

# CREW

	Nikolay TODOROV
	MIKULáš NOVOTNÝ
<b>Associate Producers</b>	Vlad RĂDULESCU
	Orfeas PERETZIS
<b>Line Producer</b>	Ramona GRAMA
<b>Country</b>	ROMANIA
	FRANCE
	GREECE
	BULGARIA
	CZECH REPUBLIC
<b>International Sales</b>	Best Friend Forever

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