

LUC BESSON PRESENTS

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# KURSK

A THOMAS VINTERBERG FILM

COMING SOON

# SYNOPSIS

*Kursk* is inspired by the unforgettable true story of the K-141 Kursk, a Russian flagship nuclear-powered submarine that sank to the bottom of the Barents Sea in August 2000. As 23 sailors fought for survival aboard the disabled sub, their families desperately battled bureaucratic obstacles and impossible odds to find answers and save them.

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# THE KURSK TRAGEDY

On August 10, 2000, Kursk – a submarine twice the size of a jumbo jet and longer than two football fields, the “*unsinkable*” pride of the Russian Navy’s Northern Fleet – embarked upon a naval exercise. It was their first exercise in a decade and the maneuvers entailed 30 ships and three submarines. Two days later, two internal explosions, powerful enough to register on seismographs as far away as Alaska, sent the ship to the bottom of the Arctic waters of the Barents Sea. At least 23 of the 118 sailors aboard survived the explosions.

Over the next nine days, the entire world was on tenterhooks, as rescue operations faltered and foreign assistance was refused. The fate of the men aboard hung in the balance.

Journalist Robert Moore’s book ***A Time to Die: The Untold Story of the Kursk Tragedy*** scrupulously dissects all the forensic evidence and every agonizing moment on the final hours in the lives of those doomed sailors.



# PRODUCTION NOTES

## FROM BOOK TO SCREEN

Intrigued by that powerful story, Academy Award-nominated screenwriter Robert Rodat (**Saving Private Ryan**) adapted Moore's non-fiction account for the screen, focusing on the drama of that very human story. Every bit as meticulous as his source material, Rodat enlisted the aid of Commodore David Russell, who led the British Royal Navy's Kursk real-life rescue mission and who also contributed to Moore's research. Russell served as consultant on Kursk and is a central character in the film, played by Oscar-winning British actor, Colin Firth (**The King's Speech, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy**).

*"The film follows the book in many ways and is a very accurate description of the events, as I experienced them,"* says David Russell. *"It has to, because the main events are known and fairly clear historical facts. It's not a documentary, so it does take some liberties. But it's true to the spirit of the book. And the book is really true to the events. In that sense, it's a very accurate, if artistically developed, view of what actually happened."*

## ENTER THE DIRECTOR

*"The Kursk tragedy was something I only knew about very superficially,"* director Thomas Vinterberg

*recalls. "But one thing that stayed with me, from the news coverage, was the tapping. That tapping on the side of Kursk... this cry for help."*

The Danish co-founder of the Dogma 95 movement and director of such art-house fare as **The Celebration** and **The Hunt** generally initiates his own projects and writes his own scripts. *"But this was an invitation from the lead actor, Matthias Schoenaerts, whom I had worked with on Far from the Madding Crowd. He asked me to read the script and, seeing him as the main character, completely made sense to me."*

*"Robert Rodat's script was already brilliant,"* Vinterberg continues *"and echoed a very universal theme of running out of time. Which we all do eventually. The film obviously touches on political issues and has a beautiful love story. But primarily it was an essential opportunity to talk about running out of time. There's a bravery to how these people deal with having to say goodbye. I thought that was heartbreaking and beautifully portrayed in the screenplay. Once I read the script, I was never in doubt."*

Then came the challenge of making that story his own. *"Robert Rodat, who wrote every word of the script, made a great effort to seek out the truth of this story,"* Vinterberg underscores. *"Now, that's a very, very big challenge because nobody knows exactly*

*what happened. They all died. So we surrounded ourselves with as many experts as possible. Then we had the challenge of making a drama. For example, the main character, in reality, did not have children. In our film, he has a child and another one on the way. We wanted to make a portrait that represented all the soldiers of the Kursk, all the 71 children left behind. So we combined things.*

*"Bob Rodat and I collaborated on the script for more than a year. I developed it into a film that I can say is a Thomas Vinterberg film, and not just a film. Which is the only way I can do this. You have to make it your own."*

## THE PRODUCTION

When it came to producing the film, EuropaCorp's Luc Besson entrusted that herculean task to veteran producer Ariel Zeitoun (**Miss Sloane, Colombiana, Bandidas**), who is a director in his own right.

Asked about the origins of this project, Zeitoun recalls, *"The project had been on stand-by for a while. And then, at some point, Luc Besson decided to greenlight it. That's when he asked me to oversee the production. Prior to that, they'd foreseen a fairly American cast. Colin Firth was already attached, but so was Matthias Schoenaerts. When I came on board, Luc, Thomas and I felt strongly that this was fundamentally a European*

film, and that we should give it the best of what was available in Europe. So we offered Léa Seydoux the female lead. That's how the project was launched.

"It was a very complicated film to produce because it was very expensive, Zeitoun continues. "It was too expensive. But we had to maintain what was at stake artistically, which was extremely important. And we had the technical challenge of building a submarine that could be submerged in water, with a tech crew inside. So those challenges were both difficult and very risky.

"I assembled an entire production team and we worked together on the budget very intensely for several months, to try to come up with the best solutions. We were lucky enough to pull together a fantastic crew, all artists in their respective fields. I should name them all, but that would be impossible. However, I sincerely want to thank DP Anthony Dod Mantle and production designer Thierry Flamand, who did remarkable jobs. Everyone, from the costume designer to the editors, deserves praise.

"Thomas played his role in that collaboration quite admirably. He didn't compromise his ambitions or his artistic vision, yet he understood the problems we might have on a production level. He always tried to be 'creative' – he loves that word. You can be creative, artistically. But you can also be creative when you're budgeting or looking for production solutions.

"This is probably the most difficult film I've ever

produced," Zeitoun concludes. "On every level. Not just budget-wise. It was demanding technically, artistically, the risks we were forced to take and the stakes we had in this film. So it was probably the most difficult film, but also the most exciting film I've ever produced in my life."

## THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

The film's narrative is told from three very distinct points of view – that of the military, the governmental authorities and the civilians. Act One revolves around the wedding of one of the submariners, introducing us to that naval community and the lives these men left behind. Act Two depicts the Kursk incident and the highly suspenseful rescue operation, led by the British Royal Navy. And Act Three very poetically hints at the aftermath.

## THE SUBMARINERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The film's main character is clearly Mikhail Averin, the commanding officer of the Kursk's Compartment 7, who is played by very talented Belgian rising star, Matthias Schoenaerts (**Bullhead, Rust and Bone, Red Sparrow**).

"Mikhail is the leader, defender and spiritual father of his men," Schoenaerts observes. "He's a highly experienced submariner, but he and his crew haven't been on a mission for ten years. So this naval exercise is very exciting to them. The Kursk was a huge status

symbol for the Russian Navy. It represented the old glory of the Northern Fleet. The men are professional seamen, so they take their work very seriously. Yet they feel like a bunch of kids, thrilled at the idea of going to sea on that magnificent ship. And then, of course, the mission goes horribly wrong."

Cannes Palme d'Or-winner Léa Seydoux (**Blue Is the Warmest Color, Spectre**) was cast as Mikhail's impassioned wife, Tanya. "I was extremely pregnant, when I first met Thomas to discuss the project," Seydoux recalls. "And when he saw me lumbering in, he thought it would be a great idea if Tanya were pregnant. I thought that was a brilliant idea. She's a wife and mother, she has a simple life. And then, suddenly, her whole universe completely falls apart."

The other wives and villagers also play a very prominent role in the film – joining forces and challenging the Russian authorities. And Tanya becomes their ringleader, mobilizing the villagers and the press, struggling to have their story broadcast around the world and desperately trying to exert pressure on the powers that be.

"Thomas is a great director, so I was very excited to work with him," Seydoux continues. "And the script was very well-written. I was very touched by the story. But I was also a little intimidated. When you do a dramatic film that's based on something real, and you're playing an actual person, it can be a bit intimidating. So you have to make it real. That was

*my obsession. I really wanted to make it real and truthful. Because Tanya carries the film's emotional component."*

## THE OFFICERS

On the military side of the equation, we have Admiral Gruzinsky, the Russian officer commanding the naval exercise, who is played by award-winning Austrian actor Peter Simonischek (**Toni Erdmann**). "Gruzinsky's almost a hero, but he isn't," Simonischek muses. "He risks his career because he feels responsible for those young men, stranded only 100 meters under the water. But he's not allowed to save them. So they tore off his stripes. He lost his job."

Gruzinsky's British equivalent is, of course, Commodore David Russell of the Royal Navy, who valiantly offered his services to Gruzinsky and did everything in his power to save those seamen. "David Russell was in charge of the British attempt to contribute to the rescue operation of the Kursk sailors," specifies Colin Firth. "He was Deputy Flag Officer on duty at Northwood, in the UK, when the reports came through that this disaster had happened. Everyone was keeping an eye on what was going on, even before the accident, because there was this big Russian naval exercise. And, of course, everybody pays attention when something like that is going on. Then there were reports of seismic events and they were considerable. So there was obviously a lot of

*interest in what had caused them."*

Firth worked very closely with his real-life counterpart, film consultant Commodore David Russell, on developing his character. "Thomas Vinterberg and I met up with David Russell sometime before we started shooting," Firth recalls. "We spent five hours together. I didn't know what to expect. Whenever I meet a high-achieving member of the military, I suddenly think, 'I'm only an actor. I pretend to do things. I haven't done anything. This guy's really been at the sharp end of everything. He's commanded battleships and submarines. He's seen action from a submarine. What I do probably seems uninteresting, at best.' But he was entirely approachable and very, very relaxed about everything. I thought he might be scary. And he wasn't. He was just unassuming. He's extremely eloquent, which helps. Because if he's your source material, clarity is helpful. And openness. And he was very, very generous with what he gave me.

"I didn't do an awful lot of research other than David. I think that was enough. You don't see me in action or operating machinery or doing anything technical. But I do have to do the technical speak, which is very difficult in a film. It's hard to make it personal, it's hard to make it interesting, and it's hard to make it sound as if you know what you're talking about. And David was helpful with that. Just knowing he was there gave me a lot of reassurance. So if I did something that was outrageously inaccurate, David

*was there to tell me. That meant I was free.*

"It's interesting," Firth continues. "Having your real-life counterpart present also adds an emotional layer. Because I'm just pretending. I'm just faking it. But I have someone there to remind me that this actually happened to somebody. It's his story being told to me. Then I'm trying to own it and tell it to someone else. That can put pressure on you – you don't wanna mess it up if you've got the real guy there. It's a source of information but it's also strangely an incredible source of emotional authentication."

## THE POWERS THAT BE

The Russian government is conspicuously absent from the scenario, which is perhaps appropriate, given that newly-elected President Vladimir Putin was famously vacationing at his summer home on the Black Sea throughout the Kursk incident. So Admiral Petrenko, a military elder with a chest full of ribbons, serves as the film's icon of Russian authority and the government's mouthpiece. And he is portrayed by the great Max von Sydow.

"Max, my fellow Scandinavian, is a legend," quips Thomas Vinterberg. "Coming from Scandinavia, I've seen most of what he's done. And that's a lot. I've always been drawn to this characteristic face and this burning inner soul of his. And I like him. And I thought it was interesting to have a person I like so much play Petrenko, the main antagonist of this

movie. Max is such a likeable person. Not necessarily a super likeable person in the movie. But he radiates humanity, in the same way that Peter Simoniscek does.”

## THROUGH A CHILD’S EYES

While the film boasts a star-studded international ensemble cast, it opens and closes with Misha, Tanya’s and Mikhail’s 5-year-old son, who is a kind of “*silent witness*” to the events surrounding the Kursk... and perhaps a harbinger of generations of Russians to come and how they now view their government. Beautifully portrayed by first-time actor Artemiy Spiridonov, Misha is often the audience’s eyes and ears, as the story unfolds.

“He’s the observer and the one left behind,” ponders Vinterberg. “We experience a lot of this story through the eyes of this child. And I guess we do so because we needed a window into this world. We’re not Russians. We weren’t on the boat. We weren’t down there. So we had to find a window into this story so we could tell it with as much humility and curiosity and purity as possible. And the best way to do that was to put ourselves in the child’s place.”

“I think that’s the aspect that interested Thomas, beyond the rest of the story, Ariel Zeitoun observes. “It was the human side of this tragedy. That’s why he took great care developing a character that was very small, at first, but became huge in the film – the

son of the two main characters. That’s also Thomas’ contribution ; it’s obvious. And the importance that this child takes on in the film, as well as his gaze and then his action... Because he is the one who has ‘the last word’ in the film. And it’s very strongly stated, indeed.”

## “THE SAILORS’ BAND, THE SAILORS’ BAND...”

The overriding throughline of the story is one of fierce loyalty, interdependence and brotherhood. The solidarity of submariners giving – their watches, their lives – for one another. They are a family. That metaphor is drawn over and over again. That certainly applies to the group of men on duty on the Kursk, but also to the larger universe of submariners around the world – David Russell, Admiral Gruzinsky and the Norwegian rescue team included.

“Obviously, brotherhood and togetherness and family bonds represent the very spine of this movie,” observes Thomas Vinterberg. “And the sacrifice for the greater community – the community of the country – becomes the central conflict. So it’s a central issue.”

And that brotherhood clearly traverses borders. “What I think is extraordinary about a moment like this,” Colin Firth remarks, “is that sailors want to rescue sailors. Once they understood that this was a tragedy, or a potential tragedy, I think that kind of brotherhood and commonality between seamen became paramount for a man like David Russell. And I

certainly think the part of the story that I’m involved in addresses the idea that nation states and the divisions caused by our political orientation or our national allegiances are secondary when it comes to common humanity.

“And I think my relationship with Peter Simoniscek’s character, Admiral Gruzinsky, underscores that. These men... One may be Russian, one may be British/NATO. But they’ve both been through the same sorts of things. And that breaks through an awful lot. We have this strangely intimate relationship without ever meeting face-to-face. We know we are both trying to do the same thing. And even within that community of sailors and navy personnel, I think there’s a brotherhood that’s even tighter, which is that of the submariners.”

The real David Russell corroborates that sentiment, “I think it’s probably worth saying that everybody who goes to sea for their living forms a kind of brotherhood. Everybody that spends their time at sea, in ships, has a certain fellow feeling. But I think it’s particularly keen among submariners. One of the reasons there is this bond is that we all train for various things, but one of them is to escape from a submarine that’s been sunk and is on the bottom. And we do escape practice, in the United Kingdom, from 100 meters, which is about the depth the Kursk was at. So we were trained to know what that compartment would look like and feel like. So that

sort of bond would be there and it would be there for Gruzinsky's character. He would understand that.

*“Not all the Russians were being obstructive and difficult. A lot of them really wanted to do their very best. And some of them, particularly the pilots of the Russian rescue submersible, the Priz, must have been extremely brave and hard-working and dedicated. And that we should recognize, as well.”*

## FAMILY VALUES... LIFE AND DEATH

That sense of solidarity, which also extends to the community of wives and villagers, who form another kind of family in the film, touches upon a recurring theme in Thomas Vinterberg's films. The Danish director has said that two of his favorite films are **The Godfather** and **Fanny and Alexander** – both films about families and their fierce solidarity in the face of adversity and tragedy. And many of his own films also speak to both the positive and negative sides of a family or a clan – **The Celebration**, **The Hunt**, **The Commune** – both in terms of solidarity and betrayal.

*“That is a recurring theme of my movies,” Vinterberg admits. “It's kind of my source, I guess. It's the thing I keep coming back to. I was already fascinated with family life, togetherness, the individual against the community, at film school. It breaks my heart. Maybe it's because I grew up in a commune, which was this beautiful extended family. Then I grew into another commune, which was Dogma 95. So communities,*



*communes, film crews have been influencing my entire life. And I keep coming back to that. And that's why, when I received Robert Rodat's script, I insisted on spending more time with this community before this boat explodes. Because I wanted to get into the heart of it. I wanted to see this wedding unfold and all these people just living together."*

That sense of kinship and mutual support is also a very Christian, "help thy neighbor" concept. And *Kursk*, a film very much about life and death, is presented within that context. The first act revolves around the wedding, the third act around the sailors' funeral, and throughout we have the prominent presence of an extremely pregnant Tanya – the very giver of life.

"Obviously," Vinterberg reflects, "this is a story about life and death. Everything and every scene in this movie is about life and death. It's about running out of life and about giving life. It's about Tanya walking around, trying to breathe because she's pregnant. And it's about the guys in the submarine trying to breathe because they're running out of air.

"My wife is a priest. And she tells me that, in the tradition of death, people used to talk much more about this. People had a much more ongoing, conversational relationship to the fact that our lives are going to end. But there's become this fearfulness about it that I'm not sure is healthy. And this film is a kind of confrontation with the fact that we will all, evidently, run out of time."

## THE DIRECTOR'S VISION

"First and foremost," Thomas Vinterberg muses, "making a movie that takes place in a different country, where suddenly everyone is speaking English, I had to find another way of being truthful. That was very important to me. I had to create as much truth as I could. And believability comes down to how we move the camera around, as well. It was super important that there was an engagement and a purity between the actors and the camera. At some moments, you'll see a very spontaneous camera. Yet, I wanted to combine that with a certain element of cinema and grandness. Because I think there is a grandness to this story. There's a huge submarine. There's a big disaster. There's some huge landscapes. So I wanted to combine those elements – the elements of grandness and believability.

"For me, every character of this movie is a real person," Vinterberg continues. "I can defend each and every one and I want to defend them. Even if they make wrong decisions. Admiral Petrenko makes a decision not to save these human beings. But he does it because he has a dilemma. He's responsible for the Russian Fleet and for tremendously important secrets. That's his job. And he chooses to defend that above humanity. I think that's the wrong decision, but he's still a character I'll fight for. Every person has a reason for what they're doing."

"I like that about Thomas," Matthias Schoenaerts notes. "He doesn't demonize either side. He doesn't label a certain government as an evil force. He's always looking for the nuance and for the humanity within that reality. That's why he was the right director to make this movie. It's not about good or evil, it's about good and evil and how those two things merge and sometimes you can't distinguish one from the other."

Ariel Zeitoun adds, "The screenplay operates on several levels. We begin at the bottom, on the seabed, where we spend a certain amount of time. But there's also what happens on the surface of the water – Russia's relationship with the Western world. And then there's what's happening on terra firma, with the sailors' families. I think that's the most Vinterbergian part of the film.

"That was fundamental for Thomas. Making a film exclusively in a submarine, with people fighting for survival, etc... Yes, that's interesting, that's fine. But the additional dimension that he insisted upon and brought to the original screenplay was the living – the people who were fighting for those who were dying.

"I think this film is the most personal of Thomas' more mainstream films. That's quite obvious in the way the characters are treated, in their relationship to life, their everyday world. One thing about Thomas that always impresses me is his relationship to reality. He had to know exactly what a submarine was like, so

that everything rang perfectly true. Talking about a machine is one thing. But human beings must also have a meticulous, absolutely profound relationship with reality. So in that sense, this film is linked to all of Thomas' personal films. I think that's something you feel in the film. He's not a gun for hire on this project.

"He may not have written the script," Zeitoun admits, "but he was enormously involved in it, in pre-production. He brought lots of ideas and directions. His relationship with the screenwriter is just like his relationship with the actors. He never gets angry. He speaks, he asks, he makes suggestions, he questions... And little by little, by dint of questioning, he implicates himself. That's his way of making it his own. At the same time, he had great respect for the screenplay. If he was uncomfortable with a scene, he'd call Robert Rodat and they'd discuss it together. And even though Robert was in the United States and we were in Europe, and we had to shoot, we waited. There was no question of Thomas overstepping his position or dismissing Robert's.

"He could have made a film about sailors at the bottom of the sea or a struggle between the major Western powers and Russia. Because there were things in the film that could have led us in that direction. But that wasn't what interested Thomas. Nor us, in fact."

## THE ACTORS

The film brings together an impressive ensemble of international actors – Matthias Schoenaerts, Léa Seydoux, Max von Sydow, Colin Firth, Peter Simonischek.

"I first met Matthias on **FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD**," Vinterberg remarks. "Together, we created the character of Oak, whom we both fell deeply in love with. He became a man and a character we both admired. I guess that's why Matthias 'cast' me to direct his next movie. And possibly because he saw a parallel between the character of Oak and this character of Mikhail – both very noble, both very heroic, both very humble. Both are very loveable, very strong and very soft, at the same time. They're two very nuanced, beautiful characters.

"Matthias comes from a tradition of spontaneity, wanting to be in the moment, wanting to embrace the moment. I come from a tradition of preparing. I like preparation. And because he's such a generous, loveable man, he actually appears at my rehearsals and works with me. Even though I think he might like the spontaneous moment better.

"Having Léa Seydoux and Matthias Schoenaerts in front of me, it made sense," Vinterberg remarks. "Both are fantastic actors and they appear slightly Russian to me. I don't know what Russians will say about that! But for me, it really worked. And she also looks super

pregnant. She does that really well.

"Léa Seydoux was so generous. She was 100% open. She was so devoted and gave the most vulnerable sides of herself – to the camera and to the crew and to me. I felt great trust from her. And her character ended up being quite heartbreaking. She's very truthful, very fragile, very vulnerable and very, very honest. It was so courageous of her to be that honest in front of a camera."

This is the first time Seydoux, perhaps best known for her roles as an intellectual lesbian and a James Bond girl, has played a mother. And **Kursk** is indeed the first film she's made since she gave birth to her own first child.

"I think the fact that I'm now a mother, myself, helped me," Seydoux interjects. "But I've always cherished the subject of motherhood. For me, it's one of the most important subjects in the cinema. Motherhood and love. So, Tanya's story really resonated with me. And I think all mothers can relate to her struggle."

Director Vinterberg refers to Artemiy Spiridonov, the young actor who plays Misha as "this little miracle of a boy. Such a sweetheart, so collaborative, so curious, so open, so keen to make this work. And so super good. And by the way, Artemiy is the only actual Russian on this whole movie, which I thought was interesting. I wanted him to speak Russian at some point but I couldn't really motivate it. It would have made the other 107 actors look ridiculous."



Seydoux adds, *“This was Artemiy’s first film. He wasn’t really a professional actor. And he’s brilliant. He’s extremely intelligent. And he wasn’t acting, he was just himself. It was simple and immediate. I just loved working with him.”*

Vinterberg also has nothing but praise for Colin Firth, *“He’s amazing. Here’s a movie star. Yet, he’s not on drugs, he’s always on time, he knows his lines, he’s incredibly humble, super engaged. He’s even nervous about his performance. And he’s very, very, very good. He’s kind of everything, which is rare. I just loved working with him.”*

Even the real David Russell, who Firth plays in the film, was bowled over by his performance. *“He did a brilliant job of portraying the sort of feelings we’d talked about – the technical challenges, frustration, sadness and a feeling, I suppose, of failure, in the end, that we didn’t succeed. He was very keen to bring that authenticity – technical but also emotional authenticity – to the role. And from what I’ve seen, he’s achieved that. But,”* Russell laughs, *“on one occasion, when he was shooting one particular scene, I said, ‘I’m not sure you got that quite right, Colin.’ So I actually gave notes to Colin Firth. When I told my wife and daughter, they were in hysterics that I could possibly dare to do such a thing.”*

## WORKING WITH THOMAS VINTERBERG

*"I first became acquainted with Thomas Vinterberg through his theater work," Peter Simonischek notes. "He did a very good play called **THE FUNERAL** about ten years ago. Then I saw a theatrical version of **THE COMMUNE** in Vienna a few years later. And I've seen all his films... Because I am always looking for magicians!"*

For most actors in search of truth and purity, Vinterberg is indeed a kind of cinematic "magician."

*"I really loved working with Thomas," Seydoux confesses. "He's very smart and very sensitive. And communication was so easy and fluid. Not everything can be expressed in words. Sometimes it was just a look and I could see that we were feeling the same thing. He had incredible empathy for the story he was telling about those women, about the submariners. So we were on the same wavelength, in a way. Working with him was very interesting, very nurturing."*

Schoenaerts concurs, *"What I think Thomas does in a very interesting way is find that balance between a macro-reality and a micro-reality. You have the diplomatic reality, which was a worldwide phenomenon at that time. And you have the micro-reality of these families, who are torn apart by fear and not knowing what happened, and these men stuck in that hyper claustrophobic compartment, which is getting smaller and smaller as it's filling with*

*water. Thomas is really a master of balancing all those elements."*

Colin Firth is even more emphatic, *"Thomas is the reason I did this. I remember the Kursk incident. And I thought it was a fascinating thing to explore. But the reason I took this job on was Thomas Vinterberg. It could have been almost anything, really. I'd been dying to work with him for 15 or so years. So that was the hook."*

*"And when you've loved somebody's films, it's quite interesting to work closely with them, just to see how they've arrived, what the process is. How you get something that's that compelling and that resonant and truthful. And I found out. He didn't disappoint me."*

*"But Thomas has a way of working with everybody," Firth continues. "He has an antenna. It's something very undefinable. It's not just about telling a story for dramatic effect or telling it coherently or logically. He has a way of finding that strange sweet spot you can hit. Whatever it is that gives a person goosebumps. Whatever it is that surprises people. The meat of a scene that can seem very boring. The scene, on the face of it, can seem banal. Just an exchange of information or a moment of exposition. And Thomas will probe to see if something's actually going on. It's not gratuitous. He's not trying to impose drama on something. But maybe, in this moment, something really might be going on. This guy might be insecure about this. And that guy might be angry about*

*something else. That can all be underneath, 'Can you pass the cheese?'*

*"There's nothing pretentious about it," Firth insists. "It's, I think, scrupulously honest and about looking for possible ways to find the meat of a scene. You know, my character could have been a rather one-dimensional military figure. Giving instructions and talking technical stuff. And it never felt like that at all."*

*"Thomas' relationship with the actors is very special," Zeitoun interjects. "He really builds a relationship of trust. He creates that trust with the actors and they feel comfortable. I don't think I've ever seen him speak sharply to an actor. He's always smiling, he always tries to put them at absolute ease. It takes a lot of patience to do that, but it also necessitates a great many qualities. Because sometimes, on set, after thirteen or fourteen hours, you can lose patience. I never saw Thomas get impatient with his actors, whatever they asked him. It's also a way for him to get what he wants from his actors. He has such great confidence in them, they can only reciprocate."*

## THE CREATIVE TEAM

Vinterberg enlisted two of his most faithful, long-standing collaborators on this project – cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle and editor Valdis Óskarsdóttir, both of whom have worked with him, on and off, ever since **The Celebration**.

“Editor Valdis Óskarsdóttir and I have shared many years of collaboration,” Vinterberg declares. “She’s from Iceland. She’s without compromise. She has an enormous sense of courage and integrity and strength. We needed someone who could take charge of this project and help me make courageous decisions. And she did.”

“Director of Photography Anthony Dod Mantle and I started out even before *Dogma*, on my first feature, **THE GREATEST HEROES**,” Vinterberg recalls. “We were both burning and young and eager and egomaniacs. Now we’ve both grown older and things have calmed down.

“First of all, he’s a very dear friend of mine, which means a lot. You spend years making a movie like this. And I want to be with people I admire. I admire him as a person and a cinematographer. He breaks down barriers with the actors. And over the past 10 or 15 years, he’s taken control of the big machinery of Hollywood filmmaking. So he could bring both to this project. His experience and ability came as a fantastic package for this movie.”

Anthony Dod Mantle concurs, “*The Greatest Heroes* is a film that’s very close to our hearts. About a year later, we got swept up into the manic *Dogma* period and propelled out into the world in all different directions. But Thomas and I stayed together for five more films. So we feel a bit like brothers. But we hadn’t made a film together for some time. Then, out of the blue, he

told me about this film and the kind of film he wanted to make. And it felt like a good thing to come back together on. After five minutes of chitchat, we were back in the old groove.

“As soon as we started prep,” Dod Mantle continues, “Thomas, Ariel and I began talking to production designers. I mentioned that to Wim Wenders, who’s a friend of mine, and he recommended Thierry Flamand.” Wenders had worked with Flamand on three films over the years, **Until the End of the World** (1991), **Beyond the Clouds** (1995) and **Les Beaux jours d’Aranjuez** (2016). “He said, ‘I think Thierry would be interesting and good and would work very hard for you on this film.’ And I trust Wim.”

“So we met Thierry very late in prep, and at a very difficult time for a designer to say yes to a project this big, with the resources that we didn’t necessarily have. And it took a creative and ambitious, but patient mind and designer, to make this film work. And Thierry is that. He’s tolerant, he’s eccentric, he’s visual, he’s technically solid, he’s affable. Plus, he was able to supply us with a quality submarine, which is a big thing. And which he did very well.”

## THE LOOK OF THE FILM

“I approached this movie with great curiosity,” Vinterberg admits. “I’m not the kind of dude who makes explosions and stuff. Listen, I did *Dogma* back in the ‘90s. And this is really far from *Dogma*!

“So I considered myself like a little boy coming into this shop, trying to figure out how to do this. And I surrounded myself with the best people possible.

And luckily, I was supported by some fantastic people who came up with amazing ideas. Simple ideas. Like you have to fill up a room with water, but instead we build a room and sink it into a pool.”

“The script was already a pretty exciting visual document, Anthony Dod Mantle recalls, “It’s not an action film, it’s a drama. It’s what Thomas is best at. Visually, I knew it’d be difficult, I knew I’d be challenged. I didn’t know it was going to be as physically challenging as it became. I didn’t know that when I was reading it and thinking, ‘This is gonna be fun!’”

The primary set piece to be constructed in the studio was, of course, the Kursk itself. Production designer Thierry Flamand’s major contribution was the submarine’s Compartment 9, where the submariners are trapped for most of Act Two.

“Compartment 9 was a submergible unit that could slowly be tilted and angled down, so we could create the water level we wanted in the tank that we had,” Dod Mantle specifies. “And I could still light safely from above without cables in the water. And we had underwater lighting. Smaller sections of the sub were also built, the other compartments – Compartment 7, Compartment 6, the tunnels. They were all little sections we pieced together and storyboarded, so



*we'd know how to cut the film. It was a big jigsaw puzzle."*

Film consultant Commodore David Russell attests to the film's authenticity and the meticulous job the art department did on the submarine set and naval equipment. *"I went to the studio near Antwerp, where they'd constructed a huge set representing the inside of the submarine. I have to say, they did a fabulous job. I never believed it would end up looking as realistic as it does. They also constructed a model of the LR5 submersible we used, which was really lifelike and impressive, as well."*

Vinterberg also uses the device of widening the screen to an anamorphic frame when the Kursk shoves off, and then shrinking it back down to a 1:1.66 format when all is lost, which lends the film an almost mythical aspect, reinforcing the notion that this is a kind of "tale" seen through a child's eyes.

*"I think it's close to target to say that this is seen through a child's eyes," Vinterberg muses. "The place where we decide to widen the frame is when Misha is watching his dad disappear in the ocean. And I wanted to embrace that and show the vastness of all this water that they're about to disappear in. I also wanted to say, 'Okay, this is where things really begin.' It's kind of a chapter heading. And at the end of the film, where the screen closes down again, it represents the running out of opportunities. And the end of their time. But I'll leave that to the audience to*

experience and have their own interpretations.”

## THE SHOOT

“The film was shot in two locations,” producer Ariel Zeïtoun states. “We shot most of it in Belgium, at the AED studios, in Antwerp. We also sought out practical locations in Belgium. Then we shot in France for a few weeks, mainly on French military bases. We obviously benefited greatly from that. The French Navy was very open, very cooperative. And between the boats they put at our disposal and the VFX possibilities we had, we created some very beautiful Russian ships. That’s how we reconstructed the Russian Fleet.”

Midway through the film, the submariners run out of oxygen cartridges and Mikhail and one of his men volunteer to go into the adjacent compartment – now completely flooded with glacial waters – in search of replacements. Otherwise, all the men will die. The scene is incredibly suspenseful and quite astonishing, in that it was done in one long, continuous, seemingly endless take, with both actors swimming under water throughout.

“That long dive scene is interesting,” Vinterberg observes. “When this film was first introduced to my life, years ago, I wanted most of the movie to be shot in long takes. Because I thought time was essential. And when you do long takes, you can feel time. I eventually abandoned that idea and narrowed it down to that one very crucial moment of not having

any air and having to swim under water for a very long time. It’s over 3 minutes long, with no cuts. Because we had an actor who could stay under water for more than four minutes. Which I thought was impossible. That’s all I want to say about that scene. What else we did, I’ll keep secret.”

The crew also did a few shots on a real submarine – Le Redoutable, which is housed at the Cité de la Mer naval museum in Cherbourg-Octeville, France. Most notably, it was used for Mikhail’s long walk through the compartments of the Kursk, as the sailors board the submarine for their maneuvers.

“Thierry didn’t want to shoot on Le Redoutable, because it’s very French,” Dod Mantle recalls. “But we managed to dress it and make it look right. And what you get, shooting on a ship like that, is a seamless, long walk, because it’s so intact. And you get a little bit of extra production value.”

As gifted as Anthony Dod Mantle is as a cinematographer and lighting designer, it seems to be his ability to connect with actors and bring even more truth to what’s on screen that Vinterberg most appreciates about his longtime collaborator. “Anthony has this dance with the actors and has an almost psychic relationship to what happens on the screen,” Vinterberg insists. “He knows before things even happen.”

Dod Mantle attempts to explain, “I like to be as close to the camera as possible. So, ideally, I operate. And

I prefer to be able to move emotionally, at will, even though I might be on a dolly or a crane. I tend to change my ideas from take to take. So I stand close to an actress or an actor and I look at them in a certain way and they look at me in a certain way and there’s just a piece of metal between us. There’s really nothing between us. It’s a contact. You can call it bonding or magnetism, but it’s real. And you can’t always articulate it, as a cameraman or woman, or understand it, as an actor. But it’s there. If you’re open to that, then half the time you do know what’s going to happen before it does.”

## THE SCORE

The film’s use of music is also very beautiful, yet extremely subtle. And the one moment when the music is front and center is the presence and then absence of the male voices in the church choir at the beginning and the end of the film, which underlines the themes of the film in a very heartfelt way.

“The choir is essential to this movie,” Vinterberg concurs. “There’s this conversation between boys and men, in the beginning. That becomes a one-sided conversation at the end, because all the men are lost. I think that was the hook for our composer, Alexandre Desplat. That’s what made it impossible for him to turn down the project.

“Beyond that, we tried to find this sense of truth in the music, as well. Even though this isn’t a Russian movie,

*it does take place in Russia. But we didn't want to make a cliché. So we focused on the instrumentation and the instruments of Russia and on the history of its music. Then we built our own subtle musical universe out of that, in a way that we felt was humble before that amazing musical tradition and, in some sense, faithful to it."*

Another musical moment that stands out is the song "Enter Sandman" from Metallica's mythic 1991 Monsters of Rock concert in Moscow, which plays on the TV as the sailors board the submarine. The lyrics of that song parallel what's about to unfold in the lives of these men and how those events are filtered through a child's – Misha's – eyes.

*"First of all, I'm a huge Metallica fan," Vinterberg admits, "I've worked with them and I've followed them closely for a while. And that was one of the biggest concerts of all time. There were hundreds of thousands of people there. I was struck by the fact that it happened in Moscow. And at a very important moment in Russian history. It's where everything changed. It's what this story grew out of. It's when the Russian Fleet started to decay, but the country began to liberate itself. It's where the Russian press was suddenly freed, which made the press conference of our movie possible. You can see that actual conference on the Internet. And ironically, the Kursk event became the end of the free press in Russia. But that concert happened at a break in time and*

*symbolized a radical change in the country. And the Moscow Metallica concert became kind of a symbol for that. That's why I found it so important."*

## THE FINAL FILM

While based on actual events, when all is said and done, **Kursk** is a dramatic film. It tells a very human story of men and women battling nature and governments and struggling to stay alive.

As for the incident itself, there are still many conflicting "truths" floating around as to what really happened back in 2000 and why. But the fact that Commodore David Russell, of the Royal Navy, was both a consultant on the film and a character in it gives the film its own kind of truth. He is one of the few people who were actually in the middle of that event and his presence enriches the film in so many ways.

*"I hope that's true," Russell comments. "I think that's important. And it was important for Robert Moore, who wrote the book. We both accepted and knew that the movie would not be a documentary but would be an artistic interpretation of the event.*

*"Still, watching those scenes was surreal for me. It brought back the real feelings of grief, almost, that we weren't able to save anybody. I suppose, in particular, the feelings of sadness I felt for the families.*

*"But the movie does stay true to the central truths of the incident," Russell continues. "And it hints at the frustrations that we felt and the political tensions. Why did the Russians actually not want help from anybody more quickly? And there are lots of reasons why that is. But Thomas and everyone else involved have produced a movie that tells a really important story in a very authentic and credible way. Yet with a huge amount of emotion. And I think, in that sense, it's a beautiful movie.*

Producer Ariel Zeitoun looks back on the **Kursk** production and reminisces, from his point of view, *"You know, there are scenes where you think, 'We'll let them shoot that one, but it'll never make the final cut.' And I had two or three sequences like that on this film, where I thought I'd easily get rid of them in the cutting room. And those scenes, once they were cut into the film, are incredibly powerful. And they're the scenes I'd fight for today.*

*"That's also one of the lessons of this profession of ours. When you produce a film, you don't have the truth. You have a script. There are things you like, things you do not like. But a script is just a springboard. It's a small staircase that allows you to make the film. Or a big staircase, if you like. It doesn't matter. In any case, we move from the writing to the image. And the image of a single shot generates things you could never have imagined. Suddenly, you're looking at a human being. What were tirades in the script can*

sometimes become a single phrase. You understand everything because it's spoken by a human being.

*“That’s how it was with this film. In the final sequence, this child, with a single gesture, commits an act of rebellion. There used to be dialogue, people were talking. And little by little, it all came out. The words, one after the other, were removed and all that remained was the act, the looks and the meaning of the scene. And it’s all the stronger for that. So, what I remember is that, despite all the films I’ve made and despite all the things I think I know, in the end, I’ll always be blown away by the final films, when they’re made like this one, when there’s a director like Thomas in charge and when there’s an ambition surrounding the film. When there’s that ambition, you’re always blown away.*

*“And I remember our first day of shooting,” Zeïtoun continues. “We were on a military boat in Toulon, and Thomas brought everyone together – the crew, the extras, the soldiers, the sailors. And he made a little speech to launch the production. And one of the things he said was, ‘We’re about to make a film about people who died. We’ll do it in their honor and we won’t betray them or use them. We’ll be honest and fair.’ I remember, it was very beautiful. It was also very simple. And that’s truly the way he approached this film and the spirit it was made in.”*

Summing up that sentiment, David Russell remarks, *“Someone said to me the other day, ‘This movie’s*

*about you.’ And I said, ‘Well, actually, it’s not.’ And that’s really important to remember. It’s not about me. It’s not even about Petrenko or Gruzinsky or anyone. It’s about the submariners. And in a way, it’s about those particular submariners, who went to sea in a ship that was meant to be the best of the Russian Fleet. They were doing their duty for their country. It’s about their experience and about the experience of their families. And if there were a dedication to this movie, it should be to submariners and their families. Because they are a very special group of people.”*

# CAST

Mikhail Averin .....	<b>Matthias SCHOENAERTS</b>
Tanya Averin.....	<b>Léa SEYDOUX</b>
Commodore David Russell .....	<b>Colin FIRTH</b>
Admiral Viacheslav Gruzinsky .....	<b>Peter SIMONISCHEK</b>
Anton Markov .....	<b>August DIEHL</b>
Vladimir Petrenko .....	<b>Max VON SYDOW</b>
Oleg Lebedev .....	<b>Magnus MILLANG</b>
Pavel Sonin.....	<b>Matthias SCHWEIGHOFER</b>
Graham Mann .....	<b>Steven WADDINGTON</b>
Misha Averin.....	<b>Artemiy SPIRIDONOV</b>

# CREW

Director.....	Thomas VINTERBERG
Screenplay.....	Robert RODAT
Based on the book “A Time to Die” by.....	Robert MOORE
Producer .....	Ariel ZEÏTOUN
Executive producers .....	C. Thomas PASCHALL, Ray WU, Lisa ELLZEY
Director of photography.....	Anthony DOD MANTLE, A.S.C., B.C.S., D.F.F.
Casting.....	Gigi AKOKA, Hervé JAKUBOWICZ
Casting UK.....	Toby WHALE
Editor .....	Valdís ÓSKARSDÓTTIR
Co-editor.....	Sigurdur EVTHORSSON
Production designer .....	Thierry FLAMAND
Costume designer.....	Catherine MARCHAND
Sound.....	Jan DECA, Jean-Paul HURIER, Guillaume BOUCHATEAU
Original score .....	Alexandre DESPLAT
French release .....	EUROPACORP DISTRIBUTION
International Sales.....	EUROPACORP

a **VIA EST / BELGA PRODUCTIONS** co-production with the participation of **OCS**

with the support of **SCREEN FLANDERS, THE BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION, WALLIMAGE (WALLONIA)** and the **BELGIAN TAX SHELTER SYSTEM OF THE BELGIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

Drama • 1h57 • Aspect Ratios : 1.66/2.39 • Sound : Dolby Atmos • Photos : Mika Cotellon

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A THOMAS VINTERBERG FILM MATTHIAS SCHOENAERTS LÉA SEYDOUX AND COLIN FIRTH "KURSK" PETER SIMONISCHEK AUGUST DIEHL AND MAX VON SYDOW DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY DOD MANTLE, A.S.C., B.C.S., D.F.F. CASTING GIGI AKOKA HERVÉ JAKUBOWICZ  
CASTING UK TOBY WHALE EDITOR VALDÍS ÓSKARSDÓTTIR CO-EDITOR SIGURDUR EYTHORSSON PRODUCTION DESIGNER THIERRY FLAMAND COSTUME DESIGNER CATHERINE MARCHAND SOUND JAN DECA JEAN-PAUL HURIER GUILLAUME BOUCHATEAU ORIGINAL SCORE ALEXANDRE DESPLAT  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS C. THOMAS PASCHALL RAY WU LISA ELLZEY PRODUCER ARIEL ZEÏTOUN BASED ON ROBERT MOORE'S BOOK "A TIME TO DIE" WRITTEN BY ROBERT RODAT DIRECTED BY THOMAS VINTERBERG

VIAEST



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