

'Give Me Liberty': Film Review | Sundance 2019

Russian emigre writer-director Kirill Mikhanovsky's freewheeling serio-comedy draws inspiration from his experience as a Milwaukee medical transport driver.



Courtesy of Sundance Institute

Chris Galust and Lauren "Lolo" Spencer in 'Give Me Liberty'

Nobody since Donald Trump has shown more goodwill toward Russia than writer-director Kirill Mikhanovsky and his fictitious main character Vic in *Give Me Liberty*, inspired by one of the filmmaker's earliest jobs as an immigrant in Milwaukee, driving a transport van for people with disabilities. The crucial difference is that we can all get on board with this wonderfully anarchic dark comedy, which deftly welds its frenetically farcical structure to a humanistic portrait of marginalized communities thrown together —

unassimilated elderly immigrants, low-income African Americans, the handicapped.

Made on a microbudget with lots of invigorating rough edges, this distinctive movie is like an underclass daytime version of Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*, reaffirming the resilience of the American Dream even amidst spiraling disorder. Mikhanovsky previously made the little-seen Brazilian feature *Fish Dreams*, which debuted in the Cannes Critics Week in 2006; this more personal work written with Chicago playwright Alice Austen should earn the director wider attention.

Mixing nonprofessionals with experienced actors in a kind of charmed, remarkably sustained controlled chaos, the unpredictable story careens across two boisterous hours, pausing for breath only late in the action in sequences made all the more emotionally resonant by the noise and bustle of their surroundings. In one such scene, the use of Milwaukee indie-folk heroes Bon Iver's gorgeous "Holocene" achieves a level of sublimity matched in recent cinema only by the impeccable music choices of Andrew Haigh.

Chris Galust, an instinctive screen natural discovered in a Brooklyn bakery, plays young Russian-American Victor, whose day gets off to a stressful start when he's trying to get his grandpa (Arkady Basin) ready to catch a bus to the funeral of fellow Russian transplant Lilya. The uncontrollable old man is easily distracted, eager to indulge his passion for cooking chicken even if he's forbidden from using the kitchen unsupervised. That makes Vic late for his paying job as a medical transport driver, a frequent occurrence already causing his supervisor to lose patience.

Vic's passengers on that winter day's route include a morbidly obese man with a nonstop litany of complaints and two regulars at the Eisenhower Center, a vocational facility for adults with severe neurological or developmental disabilities, one of whom is an Elvis superfan preparing to sing "Rock Around the Clock" at the center's talent show. (Other highlights include an endearing Springsteen worshipper powering through "Born in the

U.S.A." with only minimal recall of the lyrics.)

Also on board is Tracy (Lauren "Lolo" Spencer), a young black woman with ALS who requires a motorized wheelchair to get around yet appears to be the most active and organized member of her sprawling family. Not one to be messed with, Tracy is snippy with Vic over his tardiness, though her easy, affectionate manner with the van's other passengers reveals her good heart.

Almost every stop entails some fresh hiccup, with progress further slowed by police shooting-related protests that cause several blocks to be closed to traffic. When Vic discovers that the bus hasn't appeared to pick up his grandpa and a whole contingent of hilariously demanding Russian funeral-goers with an accordion player in tow, he gets bullied into loading them into the van. They are as vexed about detouring into Tracy's neighborhood as she is about making the unscheduled cemetery stop. Tagging along with the Russians is burly boxer Dima (Maxim Stoyanov), who makes a dubious claim to be Lilya's nephew.

Then there's Vic's needy mother (Zoya Makhina), who wants a couch moved from her living room to make space for a soprano recital that evening and insists it can't wait. That stop also introduces Vic's sister Sasha (Darya Ekamasova), recently widowed and pregnant, who slowly melts into Dima's insistent flirtation.

Mikhanovsky and Austen train an affectionate gaze on their characters, both as individuals and as part of distinct groups that intersect and overlap with uplifting results. Hapless, hard-working, obliging-to-a-fault Vic is the axis around which everything else spins recklessly, taking heat from his boss and passengers alike. But no less essential to the film's infectious spirit is Spencer's irascible Tracy; watching her gradually soften and go with the unorthodox flow of the day is sheer delight. Likewise Stoyanov's Dima, possibly a scam artist but one whose ebullience lights up every room, along with a genuine urge to make everyone happy. He's an irresistible character, adapting to every unplanned development with lusty spontaneity.

Some of the comedy vignettes are gold — Dima's steady seduction assault on a female security guard refusing to grant him access to Lilya's apartment to hold an impromptu wake; a cemetery mix-up with mourners gathering around the wrong grave ("Fucking Siberia, fucking Wisconsin," says Dima of the bitter chill); Vic's grandpa choking the entire floor of their building with smoke after one of his defiant culinary experiments.

The director counterbalances the many antic sections of accelerated action — **vigorously shot by Wyatt Garfield with darting handheld camera** — with quieter, more poignant interludes like a visit to Tracy's family during which Vic joins the women around the dinner table while his grandpa and Tracy's grandmother in the kitchen share thoughts about the pleasures of cooking, unimpeded by their lack of a common language. The main narrative is framed and punctuated by lovely chats between Vic and an older man (James Watson) who has lost the use of his limbs but nonetheless maintains a warmly positive outlook. While sucking on cigarettes, he gently counsels the somewhat directionless Vic about life, love and ambition.

This is a movie that often seems quite crazed but never lacks a sense of purpose. Mikhanovsky also edited, establishing a deceptively shambolic rhythm that builds almost imperceptibly to a moving conclusion when Tracy's brother gets into trouble and they descend on the cop station to bail him out, just as the protest ignites.

A lingering shot of Tracy's face, the nighttime street lights playing across her features as the achingly sweet voice of Bon Iver singer Justin Vernon is heard, is inexpressibly beautiful. It's the perfect way to cap off this very satisfying film about real people living real lives, full of messy complications and sorrows yet illuminated by small pleasures, surprising connections and unexpected acts of kindness.

Venue: Sundance Film Festival (Next)

Cast: Chris Galust, Lauren "Lolo" Spencer, Maksim Stoyanov, Darya Ekamasova, James Watson, Steve Wolski, Michelle Caspar, Ben Derfel,

*Arkady Basin, Zoya Makhlina, Sheryl Sims-Daniels, Dorothy Reynolds,
Lindsey Willicombe*

Production company: Give Me Liberty Mfg.

Director: Kirill Mikhanovsky

Screenwriters: Alice Austen, Kirill Mikhanovsky

*Producers: Alice Austen, Walter S. Hall, Michael Manasseri, George Rush,
Val Abel, Sergey Shtern, Kirill Mikhanovsky*

*Executive producers: Ryan Zacarias, Brien Fenwick, Gus Deardoff, Alex
Witherill, Eric Wagner, David Stamm*

Director of photography: Wyatt Garfield

Production designer: Bart Mangrum

Costume designer: Kate Grube

Music: Evgueni Galperine

Editor: Kirill Mikhanovsky

Casting: Jennifer Venditti, Daria Korobova

Sales: CAA, Wild Bunch

119 minutes