

Sundance Film Review: ‘Give Me Liberty’

Kirill Mikhanovsky crafts an unusual comedy, in which a young man risks his job driving people with disabilities by juggling other demands.

[Peter Debruge](#)

Vic, a charismatic 25-year-old Russian-American immigrant cut from the same cloth as a young Rocky Balboa, has a heart of gold and the cheekbones of a Bruce Weber model. In another movie, this affable young man (first-timer [Chris Galust](#), who’s a natural) would almost certainly be the romantic lead, saddled with girl trouble or a small-time score of some kind — but not in “Give Me Liberty,” the second feature from Russia-born director [Kirill Mikhanovsky](#) (credited here by his last name alone), whose debut, “Sonhos de Peixe,” was a prize winner in Cannes’ Critics Week a dozen year ago.

This warm, fiercely independent comedy-drama eschews anything resembling formula in favor of a boisterous and freewheeling joyride drawn from Mikhanovsky’s own experience as the driver of a wheelchair-accessible transport vehicle. Shortly after moving from Moscow to Milwaukee (and several years before becoming a professional filmmaker), Mikhanovsky was entrusted with one of those enormous, elevator-equipped vans designed to get people with disabilities from point A to point B — during which time he discovered a wealth of amusing characters and situations seldom or never depicted on-screen.

“OK, that’s a pretty unique backstory,” you say, “but what is the movie about?” Frankly, it’s about 40 minutes too long, as Mikhanovsky and co-writer Alice Austen clumsily attempt to cram some of the wildest adventures from that job into just over two hours’ running time. The overloaded result

feels like an ultra-low-budget cross between Martin Scorsese's "Bringing Out the Dead" and the Safdie brothers' "Good Time," minus movie stars or any of the ingredients that made those remotely commercial.

An early Kickstarter page for "Give Me Liberty" suggests that its two screenwriters flirted with the idea of injecting more mainstream elements into their unconventional picaresque, although it's arguably stronger the way it wound up — as an episodic sequence of wacky mishaps that pile up over the course of a single day. It's just that this style of film tends to work better at 80 or 90 minutes (think of Sean Baker's high-energy "Tangerine"), and even more so when there's a clearly defined goal that needs achieving within that limited span. With "Give Me Liberty," Mikhanovsky creates a space that's simultaneously charitable and chaotic, but he never quite articulates what we're doing there. Its mantra may as well be "Enjoy the ride" — and that ought to be enough, except that there's so much competing for audiences' attention these days, the movie really needs some kind of hook.

What it does have going for it is Galust's agitated Vic and a colorful ensemble of characters. Vic starts his day trying to manage an out-of-control grandfather (Arkady Basin), who's liable to burn down the apartment if left unattended. After dealing with that situation, Vic heads downstairs to collect his first passenger, an overweight diabetic named Nate (Ben Derfel), who is blind, and begin his morning rounds.

From this first pickup it's apparent that, unlike driving an Uber or a Lyft, there's virtually no way to adhere to a schedule with this job, since each of his clients has special needs and few are ready to go when Vic arrives. Still, the increasingly overwhelmed young man does his best to be patient and accommodating, striving to get them where they're going on time — although things spiral out of his grasp relatively early in the morning when he returns to his grandfather's, only to find the entire floor clouded in smoke and the neighbors roaming the halls in confusion.

Meanwhile, crowded in the lobby are a bewildered womanizer named Dima

(Max Stoyanov, lovable and larger-than-life) and nearly a dozen old-timers, who've gathered for the funeral of someone in the building. Because Vic's too nice for his own good, he finds himself suckered into giving them a ride, which turns his transport van — designed to carry two or three preapproved passengers at a time — into a kind of overcrowded party bus, turned rowdy when one of the mourners pulls out his accordion and starts playing, while another spills her pills every time they hit a pothole.

Vic carries on as best he can, picking up a young woman in a wheelchair (Lauren “Lolo” Spencer) and two other people (Michelle Caspar, Steve Wolski), trying to make up for lost time by speeding recklessly down side streets and back alleys. On this particular day in Milwaukee, there's a massive protest blocking the roads, which forces Vic to get creative in finding alternate routes while the distractions inside the van escalate. At one point, he broadsides an SUV when turning a corner, and rather than risk falling farther behind, he races off after a brief exchange with the other driver.

Dynamically shot on handheld camera by DP Wyatt Garfield and cut together in a kind of delirious whirlwind, the movie clips along for a while before its anarchic momentum starts to flag — roughly around the time the van reaches the Eisenhower Training Center. Despite more than a few dead ends and an inexplicable shift to black and white late in the film, Mikhanovsky mostly succeeds, orchestrating a number of laugh-out-loud set-pieces along the way. “Give Me Liberty” catches us off guard with its sense of humor, which amplifies the sheer absurdity of certain situations while respecting the fundamental humanity of its characters — further reflected in the choice of casting actors with disabilities.

“Give Me Liberty” never patronizes these passengers, who rely on Vic to reach job interviews, talent shows, and dance parties. Pushing back on the centuries of judgment and shame imposed on the various disabilities it depicts, the scrappy yet sincere film shines an empathetic light on those whom society so often overlooks — a generosity that extends to Russian immigrants and

members of Milwaukee's still-segregated black community. There's a good chance that Vic may lose his job at the end of this crazy day, but we're all the richer for having joined him on his rounds.