



“Iron Butterflies” Turns Poetic Eye on Doomed Malaysian Airliner

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PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 22: (L-R) Anton Baibakov, director Roman Liubiy and Mila Zhlukenko attends the 2023 Sundance Film Festival “Iron Butterflies” premiere at Egyptian Theatre on January 22, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

As Ukraine continues to suffer and remain resilient under the Russian onslaught, *Iron Butterflies* could not be more timely. The ill-fated Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 that was downed by Russian forces over Ukraine nearly a decade ago, killing all 298 people on board, is the subject of the new experimental documentary that premiered January 22 at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival.

Through a collage of archival footage and artistic, multi-media interpretation, Ukrainian director Roman Liubiy has created an expressionistic stream of consciousness that evokes his feelings about this act of terrorism as much as tells a strict narrative about it.

Matter-of-fact disinformation from Russian state media is juxtaposed to scenes of downed wreckage. A Russian-made child’s bed modeled on the country’s surface-to-air missile system contrasts with actual audio from the doomed flight.

“[The Russian people] believe that we [Ukrainians] are Nazis,” Liubiy explains during the post-premiere discussion. “Most of the people of Russia believe it, unfortunately. ... They’ve seen all this propaganda for decades.”

Other found material in *Iron Butterflies* include a drier-than-dirt training film from the Russian military and benignly inhuman commentary by Russian-sympathetic witnesses to the mass murder. Placed between it all is an array of interpretive art — from modern dance to animation — that leaves much to the viewer’s analysis.

“I was looking for something that I can call surreal,” Liubiy says of the approach. “I think it’s important to keep the audience awake.”

“I feel the film is also an abstraction on how to look at the events closely, but also to fly away at a distance,” screenwriter Mila Zhlukenko adds.

We even hear snippets of Russian-born opinion that vaguely suggests Flight 17 fell victim to space aliens or may have somehow been the product of mass suicide.

Some of the most affecting parts of the film are a seemingly endless, yet emotionally charged, reading of passengers’ names and a visit to the 20th International AIDS Conference, which was to be attended by six AIDS researchers who happened to be onboard.

The iron butterflies of the title refer to the so-shaped shrapnel found in the bodies and the wreckage of Flight 17 — a damning mark of a Russian missile system that would cause the world’s deadliest airline shoot-down, yet inexplicably inspire a playful bed for Russian children.

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