

# Frances Film Forum

## Former Rhode Islander Debuts "Short" at RIFF

by Frances Syner



When the 12th Rhode Island International Film Festival takes place August 5-10 a short film by a native Rhode Islander filmmaker will be among the 279 selections slated to be shown at this prestigious annual event. "The Weight of It" is a fourteen minute "short" directed by Helen Alexis Yonov, who was born in 1979 on the Newport Naval Station while her father, Captain Sergei Alexis Yonov, a Latvian born US Naval Officer and Diplomat attended the Senior International Officer course at the War College before commanding the USS Connable. Her mother, Gail Helen Yonov was a real estate agent in Middletown.

According to Ms. Yonov, known as Alexis, the film is loosely based on the emotions that come with losing one's father. After a long illness Ms Yonov father died in January of 2005. Two years later she wrote "The Weight of It." "I took certain experiences that I had when I visited him before he died and created a fictitious account of an estranged daughter reuniting with her delusional dying father," she explained. Professionally speaking, her "short" is also a "calling card". It showcases her abilities as a filmmaker to those in the industry.

From an early age Ms.Yonov knew she wanted to be a writer-director. Her parents were extremely supportive of her dream, especially since her interest was sparked by her own family: her great grandfather, Mark Hansen, owned several independent movie theaters and nightclubs throughout Los Angeles. Her grandmother Helen graduated from the Pasadena Playhouse and her grandfather William F.Taylor was a documentary filmmaker and still photographer in Northern California. Ms. Yonov grew up primarily in Portsmouth RI where she attended St. Philomena School and graduated in 1997 from Portsmouth Abbey. While still in high school she also participated in the Rhode Island School of Design's pre college program.

Thanks to her father's naval career Ms Yonov also had the opportunity to live part of her childhood in several exotic locations including Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Moscow, Russia. "Although the beauty of Malaysia and Southeast Asia has always stood out visually in my mind it was the gravity of the 1991 fall of communism and the Soviet Union that changed my perception of the world at the age of twelve. The time spent overseas left its impression on me and infused me with a desire to become a filmmaker," recalls Ms Yonov. After graduating from Emerson College in Boston in 2002 with a double major in writing and literature, publishing and film, Ms. Yonov moved to Los Angeles where she promptly found employment in the film industry as a set production assistant on several movies including Seabiscuit, Garfield, RENT, Elizabethtown, War of the Worlds, Waist Deep, Taxi and Nobel Son.



Ms. Yonov's dream of becoming a filmmaker began to take shape in October of 2007 when she met producer Andrea Fellers with whom she is now starting a production company. At the end of October Ms. Yonov headed toward Auburn, CA taking along a twenty person crew and five actors to shoot "The Weight

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of It". She had scouted the small city located forty miles northeast of Sacramento with friends the previous summer. Then a friend told her about a family that owned a vineyard. "When I met Brenda and Stephen Taylor and John and Linda Chase of Sierra Knolls Vineyards I knew that the small, picturesque vineyard was perfect for the intimate short film" said Ms. Yonov. "Shortly afterwards I met Dan and Diane Schaffer who opened their beautiful home to the cast and crew for four days."

The story and the location is lushly captured by director of photography Cira Felina Bolla who was Emmy nominated for Best Photography/Cinematography category for her work on "Stories of the Sharpe Experience". Although the setting is in California near a city noted for its gold rush history "The Weight of It" has a distinctly New England "look" with its autumnal setting. Ms. Yonov feels her style of filmmaking "leans towards being ambiguous, allowing the audience to participate more in the experience as they come up with their own interpretation of the film." After seeing "The Weight of It" some of her friends have asked her questions about the film's meaning to which she usually replies, "What do you think it means?" As for Ms. Yonov, who plans to be on hand at the festival, she describes coming back to her native state for this momentous occasion as the "coolest thing ever".

"The Weight of It" is scheduled to premiere at the festival on August 8. Check out the RIFF website ([www.film-festival.org/](http://www.film-festival.org/)) for times and also the film's website ([www.twoifilm.com](http://www.twoifilm.com)) production stills, notes and trailer.

Frances Syner is the Theatre and Film Columnist for The Federal Hill Gazette.

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