



Life Is No Joke

A short film by Yair Shvartz

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Director Statement

In the Middle Ages, philosophers asked: if something is good, is it because God wills it or does God will it because it is good? In our story, Erwin, a court Jester from the XIV century seems to be more troubled by the question to how can one know whether one is talented or not? Blessed or cursed?

As an artist, I find that being funny was always a part of me. I could never understand what makes one funny, but yet I remember making people laugh. Throughout my childhood, the situation of people laughing because of me made me feel uncomfortable. It wasn't until one day that my mother explained to me that people are actually not laughing at me, but they are laughing because I am funny, because of the "lens" through which I see life. For me that understanding had a great impact on my formation.

Over the years, I started to wear new "glasses" that made me understand the power of humor. I shifted from "just being funny" to creating characters that will have to deal with circumstances they wished they could only repress... In our story "Life is No Joke", a jester is about to give the most important performance of his life in front of His Majesty, but starts questioning his ability to understand humor—a situation that I'm still dealing with today as a young artist.

I never had jokes of my own and never thought of myself as the class clown. On the contrary, I was a quiet and shy kid growing up, but due to the inspiration of artists like Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen, I shifted my fears and mustered up the courage to try and show the world through my glasses (though, I do not regularly wear glasses).

Yair Shvartz

"There are those people that luck out, and they have talent, and it's pure luck, it's like being born beautiful or something. You know, they have ears and can play music or can draw. Much is made of it in society, and it's very pleasurable for the audience and for the person, but it's nothing like having courage or something, where an act of volition or bravery is required. Then there's that middle ground of person that really is screwed. They do question life, they are sensitive and intelligent and all of that, and they have no talent.

If a guy has great ear for music or can paint or something, he's lucky. He's born with a certain gene for that and probably some environmental thing when he's very young. I don't find any comparison between the two. The real act of courage for me is the guy who acts in spite of an almost paralyzing fear."

Woody Allen



The story

Life is No Joke is a dark comedy short-film about a court jester who is about to give the most important performance of his life in front of His Majesty. But in this kingdom, a bad performance can cost the comedian his life... and things don't look good for Erwin when right before facing what could be his final act, an existential crisis occurs: he doesn't find anything funny anymore.

Erwin will have to make a decision whether he wants to die trying to be funny or drink the poison he brought with him (just in case).

Act 1

Erwin, the buffoon, is sitting hopelessly in his chair. He is the most dispirited jester you've ever seen.

In this prologue we learn about Erwin and his fears. His dilemma to want to be a jester, but at the same time being gutless; being afraid of failure which in his case might bring him to his death.

Erwin wants to understand the meaning of his existence; how can one be brought to this world in order to make people laugh and at the same time only be able to see the worst in it?

Act I ends when Erwin realizes that he is not ready for the task and drinking from the poison doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

Act 2

Just as Erwin is about to end his life, Peggy, the maid, enters the room to find the jester with the cup in his hand. "His majesty is ready for you."

Peggy, who is secretly in love with the sad jester, decides to reveal a secret door for Erwin to escape. She is showing him the easy way out. Between the two begins a confession. Erwin doesn't think of himself as gifted but only as a hard worker. But as being so, how will he ever be able to compete with the gifted? Peggy leaves the room letting Erwin make his decision by himself.

Act 3

The jester makes his final claim. "What is life if not fighting our fears? Hide where it's always safe? Are we all not mortals? Temptation is here. I can see my escape... It's tangible. Will they ever find me? Will it ever come back to haunt me?" All these questions and more are the main cause for Erwin's pain in the neck. The decision he has to take does not come lightly to one simple buffoon.

INT. WAITING ROOM/CASTLE - DAY

ERWIN (40) sits on his chair with a hopeless expression on his face. The room is dark and the only source of light comes from the burning torches that are hanging on the walls. With each breath that the buffoon inhales, the embraced brown paper bag gets puffed. Next to Erwin lays a vomiting bin with a sign "regurgitate area". Erwin is a jester from the 14th century.

ERWIN

That's it, I'm screwed. I'm not going to make it this time. I need to accept it, I'm just not good at this. My relatives? Well they all seem to like my jokes, but can I really trust them?

(no)

I've never been able to understand it... Humor... What's so funny about life?



A stunning location: Castello di Amorosa

We shot in the beautiful **Castello di Amorosa**, in Napa Valley, California. The castle is a stunning 121,000 square foot construction inspired by XII century castelli from the Italian Tuscany. With more than 107 rooms deliciously decorated in medieval style down to the last detail, this location was the ideal setting for our story.

The construction took over 20 years and the owner, Dario Sattui, fascinated by Italian medieval architecture, brought over 170 containers of handmade antique bricks and tiles from Europe to build the castle.





A painterly look: 35mm film and candlelight

Erwin's story takes place in the XIV century and we wanted to be as faithful as possible to this look. With such a stunning location, we felt that this castle and this story deserved to be shot in beautiful 35mm film, with its compelling emotional power, wide range of stocks, full lens selection and unmistakably cinematic look.

In order to best re-create the feeling of a medieval castle in the XIV century, we decided to use as little electric lighting as possible. For most of our key lighting we exclusively used candles and torches in the castle. This allowed us to recreate the earthy glow of a pre-electrical age, which together with the use of 35mm film produces an exquisite gilded-cage aesthetic. A great inspiration and reference for this was the work of Stanley Kubrick and his cinematographer John Alcott in *Barry Lyndon*, which won an Oscar for Best Cinematography.





The costumes

The wardrobe was designed by award-winning costume designer Mikael Sharafyan. Mikael has a passion for period pieces and provided multiple references for all the costumes, which are very accurate to the period. Inspired by medieval paintings, Erwin's jester costume was completely designed and hand-made from scratch using four different fabrics. This piece is a character itself and with its two-color scheme of velvets, it represents the dichotomy in Erwin's dilemma. The headpiece, also handmade, is an ironic take on the classic jester caps and with its drooping down points is reminiscent of drooping dog's ears.

From the canvas to the screen

Some of the main visual references we worked with were classic and historical paintings.



Stańczyk, Jan Matejko (1862)



A woman, Robert Campin (1435)



Our Paintings

We set out to create an aesthetic as faithful as possible to the XIV century. Every shot in the film was designed as if it was an actual painting.





Finlandia

Jean Sibelius. Op. 26, No. 7

Andante

Piano

The musical score for Finlandia, Op. 26, No. 7 by Jean Sibelius, is presented in a piano arrangement. It is in G major and 3/4 time, marked Andante. The score consists of four systems of music. The first system is marked 'Piano' and 'Andante', with dynamics ranging from *f* to *ff*. The second system continues with dynamics from *f* to *ff*. The third system is marked 'sempre' and 'con pedale', with dynamics from *f* to *fff*. The fourth system concludes with dynamics from *f* to *fff*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

The music

All of Yair's previous projects have featured a specific classical composer for their soundtrack. Of course *Life is No Joke* keeps up with this tradition and in this case it's Jean Sibelius, a Finnish composer of the later Romantic period, who played an important role in the formation of the Finnish national identity.

His regal and dark symphonic poem Finlandia, Op. 26, opens the film and it's the perfect complement to the images that slowly approach the castle and go deeper and deeper into its corridors until we introduce Erwin.

The Cast

Napoleon Ryan as Erwin the jester

Erwin never felt comfortable being funny, and today he has his most important task... Entertaining the king. He knows that being himself makes people burst, but he doesn't know what exactly *it* is that makes them laugh. He doesn't understand what's so funny and why he was brought to life to make other people laugh. With these serious questions Erwin is about to perform and face his majesty... but a bad performance in this kingdom has a very high price: your life.



About Napoleon Ryan

Upbeat and industrious, Napoleon is a skilled comedy British actor. His incredible talent to play naive opportunists and the hopeless, quirky everyman who gets sucked into situations beyond his control, made him the best choice for bringing Erwin's character to life. Napoleon is probably best known for his performance in the internationally acclaimed short-film *The Black Hole*, where his character managed to create a breach in the space-time continuum while doing some late night photocopying.

Napoleon has been nominated for 4 Talent's Best Comedy Performance Awards. He starred in a comedy chat show series called *The Napoleon Complex*, appeared on BBC's Bafta-nominated spoof school science show, *Look Around You* and hosted *Adventures on the Environmental Journe*, a series of educational films, winner at the Green Awards. His theatre work includes collaboration with Academy Award Winner Sir Tim Rice on the London revival of his medieval musical *Blondel*.

The Cast

Maile Flanagan as Peggy the maid

Peggy is a seasoned maid in the castle with a strong and determined personality. She is “secretly” in love with Erwin and understands the challenge that he is facing. Peggy is there to give Erwin the “push” that he so much needs. She will be the voice of his subconscious and try to guide him. In a moment of despair, she shows the Jester an escape route. She knows that the Jester has talent, but leaves it to him to make his final decision.



About Maile Flanagan

Maile Flanagan won an Emmy for Outstanding Performer in an Animated Program for *Jakers! The Adventures of Piggley Winks* in 2006. Maile is probably best known for being the voice behind *Naruto*, the international anime series phenomenon.

Maile was born in Honolulu, Hawaii and has also lived in Bangkok, Nurnberg and Munich. Graduated from Boston College, she was in the improv comedy troupe *Every Mother's Nightmare* with Wayne Wilderson, Tom McCarthy, Andrea Beutner (Hutchman), Kevin Kappock, Peter Civetta and Nancy Walls (Carell) and others in Minneapolis. Did stand-up and improv in Minneapolis at the Comedy Gallery and Knuckleheads and also with Dudley Riggs' Brave New Workshop. She moved to LA with the Theatre 911's production of *Bad Seed*, which won an LA Weekly award for Best Comedy Ensemble.

Maile has an extensive experience in television, commercials, animation and film productions and was nominated for an Annie Award for Voice Acting in an Animated Television Program at the 2005 Annie Awards.

The Cast

The extras

We carefully looked into the Napa Valley acting community and handpicked some of their most interesting faces and actors.



Dal Burns as The Monk



Kyle Stoner as The Dead Jester



Tim Giugni as The Guard



Adam Thayer as The Drunk Peasant

The team



Yair Shvartz

Writer / Director

Yair is a young award-winning writer/producer/director, currently working on his MFA in Filmmaking at the New York Film Academy, Universal Studios Campus, Los Angeles.

Born and raised in Israel, Yair proudly served in the Israel Defense Force, and began to show off his talent for editing and filmmaking in different departments and programs in the Tel Aviv University schools. After completing his BA in Communication and Marketing studies, Yair decided to pursue his dream of cultivating the entertainment industry, and moved across the world first to New York City and later to Los Angeles to complete a MFA in Filmmaking from New York Film Academy.

By challenging himself in each project he does, Yair has gained much notoriety in the film industry.

Currently Yair Shvartz is seeking to raise funds for his debut feature film based in his award-winning short-film *Bert's Plan*.



Bert's Plan

Yair's previous short film, which he also wrote and directed, is dark comedy about a struggling middle-aged writer, who in a desperate attempt to get his book published hires a hitman to kill himself.

Bert's Plan was shot in New York in Super 16mm and won multiple awards, including the Golden Eagle from CINE. A recognition that has been awarded in the past to unknown young talents such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, George Lucas, Robert Zemeckis, Ron Howard, among others.

Other awards include the Silver Palm from the Mexico International Film Festival, or the Van Gogh Award from the Amsterdam International Film Festival. *Bert's Plan* was also chosen as an official selection at the Manhattan Film Festival, the Big Apple Film Festival and Louisville's International Festival of Film.



Álvaro Fernández

Producer

Álvaro is an award-winning film and videogame producer, holding both MFAs in Videogame Design from Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona, Spain) and Film Producing from New York Film Academy (New York - Los Angeles).

Álvaro's videogame thesis project *Quimera*, was finalist in the European Sony Playstation Award at *Art Futura 2006*. Later, Álvaro worked at NCsoft, the world's leading developer and publisher of online computer games, as a Project Manager for the internationally acclaimed *Guild Wars*, which sold 6 million copies.

In 2010, Álvaro moved to the United States to pursue a MFA in Film Producing at NYFA, between New York and Los Angeles. This exciting and challenging move has allowed Álvaro to work with industry figures like Michel Gondry.

Álvaro currently lives in Los Angeles where he is working in a slate of films at different stages of development.



Ezequiel Arribas

Director of Photography

Ezequiel was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he attended Eliseo Subiela's Film School while working as 2nd AD on mainstream commercials for clients like Sony, Axn, Chevrolet among others.

In October 2011 He graduated with a Master's degree at the New York Film Academy. Since then, he has been the cinematographer for several award winning short films like Bert's Plan, which brought home a CINE golden eagle in the student category. His latest work will be screening at New Port Film Festival & Cannes corner among others.

The combination of a mathematician's skill to understand the light and a remarkable sensibility to express a story through images make Ezequiel Arribas a powerful translator of the written world of a script.



Stephanie J. Gordon
Production Designer

Stephanie J. Gordon is a feature film and television production designer based in Los Angeles, California.

A rich family history in the Hollywood film industry opened doors to opportunity. That, coupled with a talent in fine arts, architecture, and construction led to a 20 year career in film. She has worked on over fifty feature films and episodic television shows to date and her credits include titles such as *Wedding Crashers*, *I am Sam*, *Wayne's World 2*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *House MD*, *ER*, *Las Vegas*, *Raising Hope*, *Harry's Law*...

Stephanie most recently collaborated with writer/director Alejo Mo Sun on his ambitious sci-fi action film *Hirokin*, and is currently involved with Bret Easton Ellis and Paul Schrader on their contemporary thriller *The Canyons*.



Mikael Sharafyan
Costume Designer

Mikael Sharafyan was born and raised in Yerevan, Armenia. Both sides of his family include several generations of artists, writers, musicians, and actors. One of them was legendary American costume designer Irene Sharaff, who won five Academy Awards for *Cleopatra*, *West Side Story*, *An American in Paris*, *The King and I*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

An artist since a young age, Mikael is graduated from FIDM and received a Warnaco Scholarship. Mikael has worked with such successful designers such as Academy Award winner designer Colleen Atwood and Emmy award-winning designer Peter Menefee. Mikael also worked on the embroideries for Cher's Las Vegas show designed by Emmy Award winning designer Hugh Durrant. His most recent credits include the Disney feature *Enchanted*, for which he cut the princess dress.

Mika is a Renaissance man, as he's also a painter and sculptor. He chose this career because he considers the work of the costume designer to be the same as the work of a sculptor. Sculptor carves his creations out of stone; costume designer uses fabrics as his primary material to create his pieces. Because Mikael is a painter as well, he wants to make his pieces to be more like a 3D painting by making his costumes from his paintings come to life.

**Credits
and specs**

Directed by: Yair Shvartz

Produced by: Yair Shvartz and Álvaro Fernández

Executive Producers: Anat Libling, Dario Sattui and Ben Scantlin

Co-executive producer: Mark Korshak

Written by: Yair Shvartz and Pau Guinart

Cast: Napoleon Ryan as Erwin the Jester
Maile Flanagan as Peggy the Maid

Director of Photography: Ezequiel Arribas

Production Design: Stephanie J. Gordon

Costume Design: Mikael Sharafyan

Hair and Make-up: Elisa Solomon

Sound Mixer: John Maynard

Sound Designer: Dror Mohar

Editor: Yair Shvartz and Andrés Moret Urdampilleta

Script Supervisor: Jessica West

Production Coordinator: Paris Felicia Bauldwin

First Assistant Director: Nick Foiles

Second Assistant Director: Aaron Bradley

First Assistant Camera: Sebastien Thibeau

Second Assistant Camera / Loader: Sebastian Bueno

Art Director: Brittany Hites

Gaffer: Jack Elliott

Best Boy Electric: Brian Davis

Key grips: Nik Delley, Derek Bazan

Dolly grip: Raul Rivera

Key Production Assistant: Brittany Deustch

Production Assistants: Evan Weller, Adam Rico, Lauren Turigliatto, Lauren Haugan, Hannah Stephens, Cheryl Fiedler

Extras: Adam Thayer, Adam Rico, Dal Burns, Tim Giugni and Kyle Stoner

Behind the Scenes: Shuran Wang

Still Photographer: Clayton Carr

Location Manager: Jim Sullivan

Colorist: Jerimiah Morey

Legal advisor: Sher Law Group

Title: Life is No Joke

Run-time: 10 minutes

Format: 35mm film

Nationality: US, Israel, Spain

Aspect ratio: 1.85

Shot at: Castello di Amorosa, California (USA)

Camera: Panaflex G2

Completed: August 2012

With the
support of...



CAMERAS & LENSES

Panavision

The project has been accepted to Panavision's *New Filmmaker Program*, which generously provided us with a professional 35mm camera package.

Kodak

Kodak

We worked with the newest Vision 3 (500T / 5219) film stock from Kodak, who generously donated most of the stock.

FOTOKEM

Fotokem

The project was awarded with a post-production grant at Fotokem, the premier industry lab services provider, servicing titles like *Snowwhite and the Huntsman* or *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*



New York Film Academy

Yair, Álvaro and Ezequiel met at NYFA while completing their MFAs. The school kindly provided full support in this exciting venture.

Castello di Amoresa
NAPA VALLEY



Castello di Amoresa

We wouldn't have been able to do this film without the support of this excellent castle-winery and their helpful and patient managers and staff.



DOUBLETREE
BY HILTON™

Double Tree by Hilton

Thanks to Hilton's gracious support, our crew was able to stay in the majestic Double Tree Sonoma Wine Country. Hilton's award-winning culture of care made them the perfect hosts for our crew.



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