



ONCE WAS

a short film

ELECTRONIC PRESS KIT

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ONCE WAS

"ONCE WAS" STARRING VERA CHERNY AUSTIN HIGHSMITH GARGES
MUSIC BY ADELE ETHERIDGE WOODSON COSTUMES BY Eburne Fernandez EDITOR ANJOU AGRAMA
PRODUCTION DESIGNER SHANNON McDONOUGH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MICHELLE KWONG
PRODUCED BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS WRITTEN BY VERA CHERNY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER VERA CHERNY
DIRECTED BY LILAN BOWDEN



LOGLINE

Taking place at a meeting of two exes, *ONCE WAS* is an LGBTQ+ love story that asks the question: Can love exist without loss?

SYNOPSIS

A Russian immigrant confronts her American ex-girlfriend about their broken relationship.

An American artist, Kate turns everything into art and chaos. She is impulsive and brilliant, and doing her best to manage trauma and addiction. Zo is a first generation Russian immigrant who grapples with her identity and sexuality. Having first come to the U.S. as a refugee, she's dedicated her life to public service.

A year after their breakup, the two Women reunite, with one hoping to reconcile and the other — looking for closure.





DIRECTOR

Lilan Bowden

[LILAN BOWDEN](#) is an LA based Director / Actor most notable for her role as “Bex” on Disney Channel’s award winning show *Andi Mack*.

She is a proud participant of the Disney / ABC Director’s Program, and recently directed the TV show *Villains of Valley View*. Her directorial debut *Becoming Eddie* was an Official Selection at numerous festivals, and is the inspiration for developing the TV series version in collaboration with Sony Pictures Entertainment.

Her recent shorts *Oh Cha* and *Once Was (MVFF premiere!)* are in the festival circuit now. She also is: a new mom!

WRITER / EXECUTIVE PRODUCER / ACTOR

Vera Cherny

[VERA CHERNY](#) was born in Primorsky Krai, in the former USSR. She began performing at three and a half years old, at a local dance school, in Germany. At 16, she came to the United States on her own, on a full-time scholarship. She continued pursuing her undergraduate studies while participating in regional theatre productions.

She graduated with an M.F.A. in Acting from the Actors Studio Drama School in NYC.

Vera's recurring guest star credits include: Oksana Volkova on *Queen of the South* (USA), Tatiana on *The Americans* (FX), Irina Markova on *Counterpart* (Starz), Lenara on *For All Mankind* (Apple TV+), and Vera on *StartUp* (Sony's Crackle). She's also appeared on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC) and *Magnum P.I.* (NBC).

Once Was is Vera's writing debut. Her second short [Brave Little](#) is currently in development.





PRODUCER

Maggie Phillips

[MAGGIE PHILLIPS](#) is a freelance Producer based in Los Angeles. A graduate from USC's School of Cinematic Arts, she produces narrative content in all genres highlighting new and diverse perspectives, both in front of and behind the camera.

She has produced multiple independent feature films and a number of music videos for clients such as Steve Aoki, Justin Roberts, and Warner Bros Music. Her films have won several Audience Awards and have premiered at festivals including CAA Moebius, Cinequest Film Festival and Palm Springs International Film Fest.

She also works freelance with companies such as Sephora, Disney and Brat TV, and is currently working with several independent filmmakers on developing a slate of upcoming projects.

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Michelle Kwong

[MICHELLE KWONG](#) is a native New York Cinematographer now based in Los Angeles. Her passion for visual imagery stemmed from her desire to convey, capture and instill emotions that she previously couldn't do with words alone. Michelle's love for visual imagery began with her exploration of photography, which gradually grew into an interest in cinematography.

With a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in cinematography from Emerson College, Michelle has shot a wide range of content that include narrative short films, music videos, web series and commercials. Her work has garnered accolades and screened in film festivals around the country, including her college thesis film *Inside Boxes*, which was chosen as a finalist for the 2016 Cannes Short Film Corner.

Michelle is a proud member of the International Collective of Female Cinematographers (ICFC), Sporas, and the AFI Cinematography Intensive for Women Class of 2019. She hopes to continue growing as a director of photography and creative artist through collaboration.





PRODUCER / ACTOR

Austin Highsmith Garces

[AUSTIN HIGHSMITH GARCES](#) is an Actress, Published Author and Illustrator, and is now adding produced Screenwriter to list.

Austin is best known for the role of Phoebe in the Warner Brothers / Alcon Entertainment films, *Dolphin Tale 1 & 2* and as Ms. Lang in season 2 of *MTV: Scream The TV Series*. She has produced several of the independent films that she's starred in as well, including two for Lifetime Movie Network. Apart from her on-screen work, Austin is a stand-up comic having performed at such venues as the Comedy Store, Acme Comedy Theatre, and the Tampa Improv.

Her children's book, *The Miracle Tree*, about her experience as a young girl was published in April of 2019 through Doce Blant Publishing. A native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Austin graduated from the University of North Carolina with a dual degree in Fine Arts and Political Science.

EDITOR

Anjoum Agrama

Born and raised in Los Angeles, [ANJOURM AGRAMA](#) works as a freelance editor on music videos, commercials and feature films.

Her most notable work includes the VMA nominated music video for Marshmello's *Happier*, MGM's first digital series *Stargate Origins* and the Richard Branson EP'd short *Sides of a Horn*. She recently edited the upcoming psychological thriller *Monstrous* starring Christina Ricci.

Anjoum received her BA in Film & TV Production with a minor in Screenwriting from USC's School of Cinematic Arts.





COSTUME DESIGNER

Edurne Fernandez

[EDURNE FERNANDEZ](#) is a costume designer for stage and film. As a Mexican artist, Edurne has designed various short films such as *Noche Del Infierno* awarded Best Narrative Short at the San Diego Film Festival; *Welcome Back* now playing on HBO MAX, shot in Ecuador and nominated for the College TV Awards and winner of Best Live Action at HollyShorts Film Festival; and *Perfectly Natural*, winner of the Jury Prize at the Directors Guild of America's Student Film Awards and Best International College Short Film Award at Zaragoza Film Festival, Spain.

Her most recent theater works include: *Kiss* which played at the Walt Disney Modular Theater and *Mexico Expropiado*, a theatrical dance piece premiering this April in Mexico City. Edurne co-designed alongside Marcela Valiente *Distroller El Muisikul*, a new musical that premiered in Mexico City in April of 2019 and was nominated for Best Costume Design at the Metro Awards held in the City.

Edurne was active in dance competitions for 10 years as a choreographer, costume designer, dancer and make-up artist. She continues working with Mexican designers such as Annai Ramos as a Costume Illustrator and with Marcela Valiente as a co-designer for her company Conexión En Movimiento.

Edurne received a Master's in Costume Design from California Institute of the Arts and an Undergraduate degree at Universidad Iberoamericana focused on textile design.

A woman in silhouette is shown in profile, looking out over a city skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and blue, and the city lights are visible in the distance. The woman is wearing a dark top and has her hair pulled back. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

INCLUSION STATEMENT

ONCE WAS was proudly made by Women and LGBTQ+ filmmakers:

Over 90% of our behind-the-camera team identified as Women, of different racial and sexual identities.

With Women artists in front of and behind the camera, our mission is to increase representation of Women and Non-Binary talent in film.

ON SET PHOTOS

Development and Pre-Production



BUT FIRST – THE REWRITES: Actors / Producers Vera Cherny and Austin Highsmith Garces workshoping the script in 2018.



TALKING STRATEGY: Producers Austin Highsmith Garces, Vera Cherny and Director Lilan Bowden running a crowdfunding campaign in August 2021.



THIS COLOR IS MAGIC!: Production Designer Shannon McDonough and Director Lilan Bowden doing location scouts, in November 2021.

ON SET PHOTOS

Principal Photography



BRILLIANCE AT WORK: Director of Photography Michelle Kwong and Gaffer Cassie Mulcahy planning light cues.



ART IN THE TIME OF COVID: EP Vera Cherny, Director Lilan Bowden (via FaceTime) and DP Michelle Kwong on location in NYC, in January 2023.



LAST LOOKS: Hair and MU Department Head Darlene Orellana working her magic on our Leads Austin Highsmith Garces and Vera Cherny, on Day 2 (December 2021).

ON SET PHOTOS

Producing Team



PRODUCTION MEETINGS BE LIKE: The creative team – and their Emotional Support Friends – meeting on Zoom. (From top left, across: Director Lilan Bowden and Penny, Producer Maggie Phillips and Buddy, Writer / EP Vera Cherny and Vanilla Bean, and Austin Highsmith Garces and her cough drops.)



IT'S A WRAP!: The Squad celebrating the wrap of principal photography in LA..

LINKS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

ONCE WAS website:

www.OnceWasFilm.com

ONCE WAS on IMDb:

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14656330/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

ONCE WAS on Seed & Spark:

<https://seedandspark.com/fund/once-was#updates/32772>

ONCE WAS on IG: @OnceWasFilm

<https://www.instagram.com/oncewasfilm/>

Lilan Bowden on DIASPORA Bulletin:

<https://thediasporatimes.com/2021/08/11/lilan-bowden-to-direct-all-female-once-was-and-all-asian-comedy-short-oh-cha-diaspora-bulletin>

Vera Cherny on DO WORK Podcast:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6Nvd9XXb-k>

