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'20 Days in Mariupol' Brings First Oscar Home to Ukraine

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Raney Aronson-Rath, Mstyslav Chernov, and Michelle Mizner, winners of the Best Documentary Feature Film for "20 Days in Mariupol". **Rodin Eckenroth / Getty Images via AFP**

Ukraine won its first Oscar for best documentary with "20 Days in Mariupol," directed by Mstyslav Chernov, on Sunday night in Los Angeles.

The film chronicles the harrowing Russian siege of Mariupol, a once beautiful port city, by the only journalists still on the ground, Chernov and the photographer/journalist Evgeniy Maloletka.

At the Academy Awards Chernov gave a humble and powerful acceptance speech, interrupted by applause and receiving a standing ovation when he and the production group left the stage.

"This is the first Oscar in Ukrainian history. And I'm honored. But probably I will be the first director on this stage who will say I wish I had never made this film. I wish to be able to exchange this for Russia never attacking Ukraine, never occupying our cities," he said.

“Russians are killing tens of thousands of my fellow Ukrainians. I wish for them to release all the hostages, all the soldiers who are protecting their lands, all the civilians who are now in their jails. But I cannot change the history. I cannot change the past.”

He continued with an appeal to his peers: “But we altogether — you — I’m calling on you, some of the most talented people in the world. We can make sure that the history record is set straight and that the truth will prevail and that the people of Mariupol and those who have given their lives will never be forgotten, because cinema forms memories, and memories form history.”

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> After winning the Oscar for best documentary feature, “20 Days in Mariupol” director Mstyslav Chernov said he hopes the film reminds people of the “humanitarian catastrophe” in Ukraine. pic.twitter.com/gnDtT7Nmbo
>
> — The Associated Press (@AP) March 11, 2024

Later in the press room, Chernov spoke more about the power of film. “History is not always how it happened. It’s how we remember, and the future generations will look back and wonder what’s happening to us right now. They will see through the lens of cinema, whether it’s documentary or scripted.”

“20 Days in Mariupol” was made by the U.S. public television channel PBS in partnership with the Associated Press.

It has already won many awards before the Oscars including Best Documentary from Bafta and the Directors Guild of America, as well as the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award for World Cinema Documentary and the Tim Hetherington Award at the Sheffield Film Festival. At DocEdge Film Festival it won for “Best International Director” and “Best International Editing.”

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