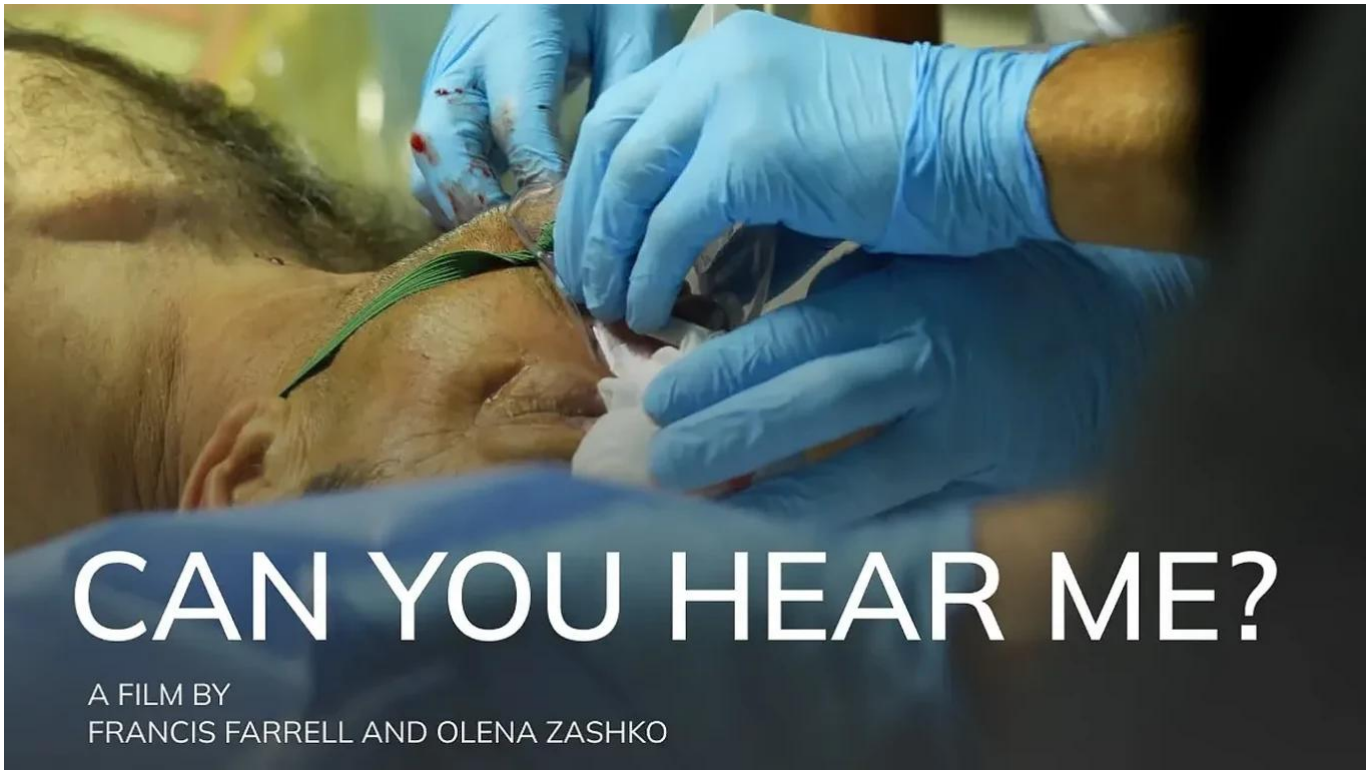
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'Can You Hear Me?' Brings Life of War Medics to Audiences Around the World

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The camera hovers over a wounded man, his face hidden by a ventilator. As hands reach out to pin him down, he howls: "Please save my legs! Save my arms!" The beeping of machines grows louder, and the pain surges. He asks to be "switched off."

It's easy to forget we are inside a packed London cinema, and not an ambulance on the front line.

London is the latest stop on the second tour of "Can You Hear Me?" The Kyiv Independent's 60-minute documentary is about the lives of combat medics on and off the battlefield. Directors/cinematographers Francis Farrell and Olena Zashko were granted unique access to follow a group of medics in the field and at a mental health retreat run by the Swedish-Ukrainian foundation "Repower" in 2024. They are now traveling with the film.

The medics are a varied group: an Afghan veteran surgeon on his “sixth war"; Tetiana, an anesthetist who enlisted soon after the invasion; and Misha, a young soldier who decided he was more useful as a first responder after saving a wounded comrade’s life.

Misha, the laidback trooper-turned-medic, finds it hardest to relax at the retreat. He wanders off with a cigarette, taking phone calls on the bus to rehab to check whether his friends are still alive.

In a scene on a ferry transporting the medics from Poland’s northern coast to Sweden we watch them sail into a different psychological space. Intertitles show the “kilometers from the frontline” rising from hundreds to thousands. “Look at that drone,” a medic remarks. It turns out to be the North Star.

A haunting score for string instruments by composer Natalyia Tsupryk builds as we watch the group unwind – sleeping, swimming, and hearing bird song for the first time in two years.

The post-film discussion makes it clear the medics seen on screen are the lucky ones. The current shortages in the Ukrainian infantry means that soldiers often serve many months without a break, sometimes continuing while injured. Co-director Farrell confirms that four of the group have been killed in action since production wrapped.

The injuries visible in the film’s scenes of surgery show how rapidly the modern battlefield is changing – many soldiers are now being treated after direct hits by drones. Drone injuries are complex and often cause problems for evacuators who may be targeted as they work. The footage is graphic but not gratuitous, with the filmmakers using the soundscape to convey the horror and adrenaline of the makeshift operating theater.

“Can You Hear Me” gives each character space to breathe. These are individuals straining under the pressure to act for the good of the group — one longs for “a home and a family of his own,” another wants “to live for himself for the first time,” and a third — drawn to the peaceful Swedish lakes and pines — wants to move abroad. Yet of the surviving medics, only one has withdrawn from service. The others continue their fight for Ukraine’s independence.

As a wartime film — and a film touring amid talks of Russian appeasement — “Can You Hear Me” is unabashedly partisan. Farrell is dismissive of “the festival circuit,” choosing to show it to audiences that come specifically to see it. The screening before London was held at the European Parliament.

But the film is also a powerful piece of art – moving and immediate. Among the journalists, academics, and charity founders mixing outside the cinema is a young Ukrainian whose cousin is serving as a combat medic in Donetsk. She has seen the film before and has come to thank the filmmakers in person.

"Can You Hear Me? The Invisible Battles of Ukrainian Military Medics" continues its European tour with a screening in Amsterdam on March 16 and one in the Hague on March 17. You can find information about the screenings and discussions here*. Or you can watch it on YouTube below.*

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