

MARIA

Not many actresses can enter Hollywood as swiftly and loudly as Maria Bakalova did.

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IBAKALOVA

After starring in the *Borat* sequel, *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* by Sacha Baron Cohen, Maria Bakalova garnered critical acclaim, winning her a Critics Choice award and an Oscar nomination. But before all the awards and red carpets, there was just Maria — a girl in Bulgaria desperate to be an actress with dreams of working with some of the best in the business.

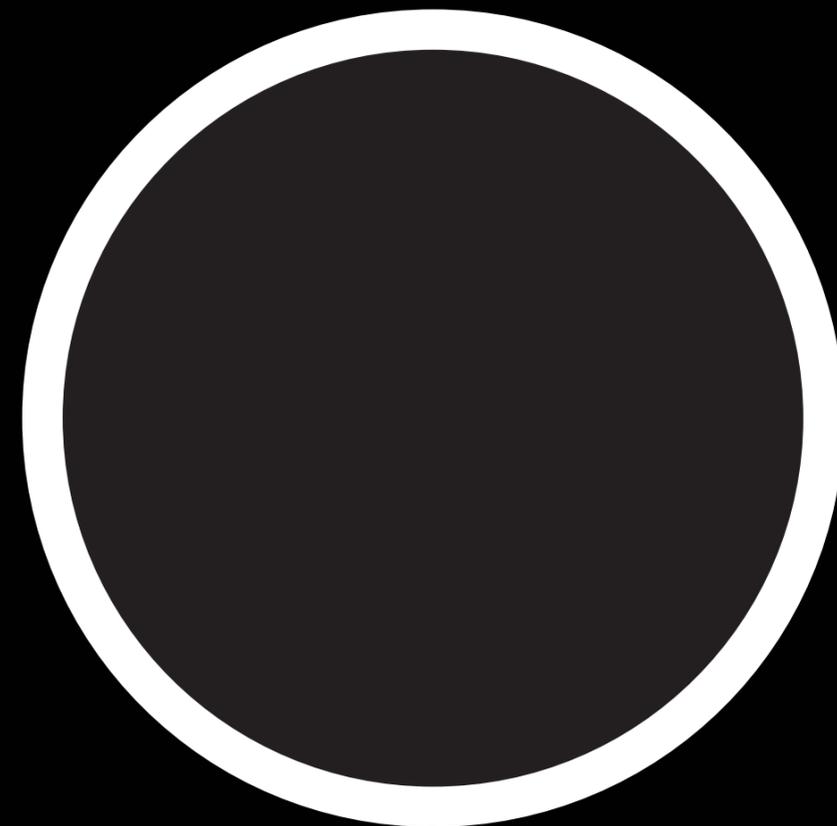
It's safe to say those dreams have come true. But those dreams required work — nothing would've come to fruition without the determination and tenacity of Bakalova. She spent time volunteering with filmmakers like Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov while passionately pursuing a formal education in acting, itching to get her hands dirty by any means necessary. She is what the West would describe as a 'workhorse', someone who doesn't just let things happen to them — she grabs every chance and every opportunity with both hands and refuses to let go.



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What is most fascinating about Bakalova, and what speaks to her work as an actress, are the characters she selects. To put it plainly: Bakalova is not interested in playing watered-down, cookie-cutter versions of what are described as 'strong' female characters. At first, she pursued acting as a means of escapism; to be someone else, somewhere else. Although that was the case at first, she now sees all her characters have one singular intrinsic thing that ties them all together: her.

It's incorrect to say she seeks out the roles that demonstrate her talent and dynamism in her craft. Instead, it's almost as if the universe places them in her path — knowing that she is the person these characters need. Her dedication to volunteering resulted in an audition for a small part in *The Father*, a somewhat sketchy tape submission that led to *Borat*, and now, with *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, audiences can see Bakalova's experience as a stage actress somewhat mimicked on the screen.

A24's *Bodies Bodies Bodies* is a kaleidoscope of chaos. Bakalova plays Bee, girlfriend to Sophie [Amanda Stenberg] who brings her to what some would describe as a 'TikTok House' due to its over-the-top scale of both the upstate New York residence and the people running amok within it. After a storm hits, one party member suggests they play a game of 'Bodies Bodies Bodies', a party game where one person is the murderer and after the lights go dark, they select their next victim one by one. Naturally, it turns deadly — both with the body count and with the so-called friends turning on one another. Amidst the blood, there are TikTok dances to 'Bored In The House', swords being used to open bottles of champagne, and screaming fights about how hard it is to run a podcast.

The film feels like a 3-act play. The long takes paired with director's Halina Reijn experience in theatre and screenwriter Sarah DeLappe's background as a playwright made the experience feel like they were actually on-stage rather than shooting a film, something that delighted Bakalova. In the role, she was tested to push herself because, unlike her co-stars who had snarky one-liners and Gen-Z comments to hurl at one another, Bee rested entirely on the actress'

ability to bring a quiet, understated presence when compared to the rest of the group. Bee is the audience; she's experiencing this gaggle of 20-somethings for the first time. When they laugh at her, someone who is just desperately trying to fit in, it sometimes feels like they are laughing at us, too.

After greeting one another with 'Zdrasti' [hello in Bulgarian], Maria Bakalova and 1883 Magazine's Kelsey Barnes get to business — chatting about everything from *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, what it was like to slap Pete Davidson in the face, her dream of bringing film from the East and the West together, and more.

You made your acting debut in a Bulgarian film in 2017 and since then you've starred alongside Sacha Baron Cohen, been nominated for an Oscar and a BAFTA, won a Critics Choice Award, and you're starring in every genre you could think of — from superhero films to slashers. You've done so much; you should be so proud. From your beginnings, how do you think you've grown and developed as an actress? Everything started with music when I was 5. I was pretty much convinced that my life would take a direction as a singer or as a flute player. When I turned 12 or 13, we got a new specialty high school of performing arts in Bulgaria and it had acting. It seemed so interesting. I wanted to escape reality; I wanted to do something else and be something else. In places like Bulgaria and Russia, you can learn to be a film director or a screenwriter but acting for cinema doesn't really exist as a speciality. So, I started with theatre and, when you're on stage, you completely escape and be someone else for an hour. I loved the communication that you have with the audience and the fact that every single time you do something, it's completely different to the one that you've done the night before.

When I turned 18 and I was in my first year in the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts as a stage actress for theatre, there was a blind audition that my classmate in the university submitted me for called *Transgression*. I only wanted to do cinema and continue getting deeper into it, but when I see the time between then and now, I realize that both of these things are personal in a different way. You have a camera in front of your face — you cannot really lie, you cannot hyper-verbalize words and actions like in theatre just because the audience has to see it in the 30th row. You have to be exactly the way that you feel it because

the camera is so sensitive. So, that was the beginning of everything. I fell in love with the idea that I could someday participate in things that are co-produced by different countries. The cultural exchange that can happen between different countries is so important to me. Around the Cold War, there was a complete separation between Eastern and Western cinema. I am dreaming of the day when they will be reunited. But to be able to do that, you don't usually have a name like mine — very syllabic with a thick accent — that people don't understand. So, I started watching international cinema and going to art house festivals and I fell in love with the weird, interesting movement called 'Dogme 95' created by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg.

I wanted to bring them up because I read you love Danish films and you basically asked to be a PA on von Trier's film set. I just love how eager you've been to get your hands dirty. It's admirable. Yeah, like I mentioned — we don't really have the privilege to participate in cinema. I was trying to grab every chance that I could to be on set and see that type of magic. I was peeping into a production in my home country and trying to get a sense of what is actually happening behind the scenes because it's a huge, well-oiled machine. Anyone can go on set and start performing and say their lines, but everything before that has to be perfectly organized. It's a puzzle; every department has to do its job properly. It takes a village of a beautiful collaboration between people with the same goal.

I started with *Transgression*, then I started working on independent cinema in my country. I was able to play interesting characters that were a reflection of us, as females. We can be multi-layered and we can be strong, while at the same time we can be vulnerable. Every character that I've auditioned for has been portraying somebody that is strong; from a teenager trying to commit suicide to another that is having a weird relationship with somebody that she should not have a relationship with, to somebody that is giving birth in a bathtub to a girl having mental disabilities, and it's been always like very deep, dark drama. Then, out of nowhere, *Borat* suddenly appears [laughs]! I didn't know a thing about comedy, and I still don't but I'm learning a couple of things here and there because I want to.

I feel lucky that I get to play different characters in different genres. I feel that is the thing that challenges me the most; it's unpredictable and you can challenge

yourself to be somebody else. A lot of actors that I've spoken to have told me they wanted to be actors so they could learn more things about themselves. For me, from the beginning, I wanted the opposite. I didn't want to know anything more about myself, I didn't want to dig deeper inside of me! I just wanted to imagine being someone else for a few months. Somehow, this is still the dream, but the more I grow and think, I realize that genre shouldn't matter as long as the movie that you watch and the movie that you've made makes people feel something at the end. It doesn't matter if they are crying or laughing. As long as they have been moved, you did your job.

So many actors psychoanalyze their characters and pick them apart and then they realize they are doing that to themselves in the process. As much as we try, we cannot really escape ourselves and at the end of the day. There is always going to be a piece of me in every character, no matter how different my characters will be. For example, Bee and Tutar; these two are complete opposites of each other but somehow, I think in the end, there is going to be something similar — me. It is not a bad thing as long as you build a character guided by a director and a screenwriter.

Let's chat about *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. I watched it over the weekend. I'll be honest with you, I'm not really a slasher/horror lover. I'm a rom-com girl. But I loved this movie. It's a perfect blend of comedy and horror. I gasped at the ending. When you first got the script, what were you thinking? I am like you; I am not a horror fan! I've seen a couple, and the one that will haunt me for the rest of my life is *It Follows*. With *Bodies*, A24 are just so freaking smart and talented with the genres that they make. They create a new genre every time they do something, and you cannot really put it in a certain box, like 'that's horror, that's comedy, that's drama.' It's always a mixture, which I think is crucially creative for our industry.

So, when I saw that it's A24, I knew that it's going to be beautifully shot. I knew it would have a great soundtrack and I knew the details in their movies are always going to be there. Plus, they know how to make content that is universal somehow because it definitely reflects on my generation but at the same time, if somebody from my mom's generation watches it, it is also entertaining and it's interesting and they find things that work for them as well.





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The dialogue that exists in the script is incredible. This movie covers so many things: the way that they communicate, the words that they're using, this kind of cancel culture that we somehow live in, which is not then necessarily a bad thing but sometimes we get to like the breaking point of that. I don't know how to communicate with my friends because I'm afraid that they're going to go after me and that's why I create a border and that brings even more fears and secrets and more lies, which I think is the biggest problem in this movie.

It's not about the blood and the mob and the hurricane. It's the friendship that we call a friendship when it's actually based on shared memories and lies. Just because we look good together in a picture, doesn't mean we are good for one another. I was reading and getting to the end of it, and I was trying to figure out who the killer was. You can cut this next bit out because it's a spoiler but Jesus Christ, *of course*, it is who it is in the end. It sounds too deep for a movie like this but at the end of the day, it's true and a great analysis of our society.

You play Bee who clearly comes from a working-class background and had a slightly traumatic upbringing with her mother. There were so many parts that made me ache for her, like when she gives the zucchini bread and the characters scoff at it. When you get a character like Bee, what usually attracts you to want to play her? Is it the fact that she's quite different from the rest of the characters? With Bee

specifically, I never got the chance to play some character like her in my previous work. They all have been extreme. When I'm saying extreme, I mean extreme.

They're loud, they're brave, they're daring, they're funny, like Tutar, and I spent pretty much a long time doing Tutar. I was doing comedy for so long while playing her and then I had to switch to Bee. She has such a huge calm in her character somehow and her personality as well. I actually wondered if I could do it because she feels so quiet and private in a way. With me, as Maria, I'm loud and out there; everything that's in my head goes straight out of my mouth which is not always a great thing!

Bee was the opposite of me and all the characters before.

Trying to play her — someone who wants to fit into the group — was interesting. She's trying to fit in the group in the wrong way because she's going to use some things that are not familiar to her, she's going to try to transform into somebody else who she's not, and that's why she's going to fail. I wanted to see what it is like, and what we'd achieve as a result of playing someone so freaking different from me. I feel like for two and a half months while we were shooting, I felt so crazy. That was the first time in my life when I felt like, *'Jesus Christ, who am I?'*

I was waking up sweating from nightmares thinking that tomorrow's going to be a bad day. It all was just from the situation these characters put themselves in.



Not only is this character different from you, but it's also different from every other character in *Bodies* too. Where other characters had to nail one-liners or be the comedic relief, Bee's inner thoughts had to be portrayed in a way that is much more subtle. She doesn't say much out loud but everything she's thinking you can see through her facial expressions. In the scene when you're walking toward the three girls with a hammer — you looked terrifying in the best way. Was there anything that you did or worked on to nail those facial expressions? Was it written plainly in the script? Yeah, definitely. She is the most grounded character that I've ever played in my life. From the first to the last scene she's in, she goes through a lot. She changes throughout, but she's pretty much stable. She doesn't have the pistol line jokes here and there, and she's not the funny girl, or the hot girl, or the party girl. She's just the new girl. I believe that when we are put in a new environment around people we don't know, we usually are not funny or loud. They put us in a new environment around people that we don't know, we usually are not that funny, we're not that out loud, we're not that open.

We're much more internal, we are figuring out whether the situation is safe to be who we want to be. Yeah, exactly. Plus, I think her character is not the center of attention. She will put herself out there, she will be nice, and she will try to be funny, and she will likely fail [laughs]. But she's the person that is grounded; she's the stable one around all these weird, insane people. I feel like she is the only one who has the most objective opinion of every one of them because she doesn't know them from before.

She's experiencing them for the first time just like the audience is. Yeah, she's like a camera.

Something that I loved, and I think a lot of people will like about this movie is that the theme's prevalent throughout — whether it's the class divide or society's obsession with social media and looking a certain way. Rather than poking fun at Gen-Z, they really are just highlighting the dangers of chasing a certain lifestyle or persona. What was it like to explore those scenes on-screen? You know what was the weirdest part? I always thought that I'm a millennial until like two years ago, then somebody told me I was a Gen-Z. Then, I started digging around and I found out I'm in between both of these things and I think everybody else is pretty much like that. Do we have a huge impact from Gen-Zs? Definitely, because we grew up with phones, we grew up with Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now. Social media is a huge part of our lives, but my mom is 40 years older than me and she's on her phone just as much as I am! You become under the influence of that fake reality that exists.

I haven't done TikTok before this movie, but now I did it recently and I realize that it's addictive. You do it and you want to do it again to make it better. Then, it's been four hours while I'm doing a dance for 15 seconds [laughs]. I feel like if we know how to use social media properly, the platforms that we have out there to spread a bigger, greater message would be incredible. It's important that you remember social media is not reality. Your time on this earth is counted and you have to spend it as much as possible with people around you, with people that you love. I think all of these people in this movie do not respect the time that they have with each other and they're just on their phones.

Was there anything you read or watched to prepare for your role in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*? Well, I remember that I was talking with





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3 which is amazing. I know you were just at Comic-Con so I'm sure you're exhausted. What has it been like being welcomed into the Marvel Universe?

Oh my God. Thank you so much. It was my first Comic-Con and I was so scared because we went there with *Bodies* as well. On the first day, we were running around the city and jumping from one outlet to another outlet. It was overwhelming but calm at the same time.

But with *Guardians* and Marvel on the second day, there were tons of people out there. It was crazy. You realize why you're doing it at the end of the day. With all of my love for independent cinema and art houses, when you see so many people being so welcoming and excited and loving the things that you're sharing with them, it's amazing.

You realize you're actually doing something great because the people that are watching the films are there and they're going support you and they're excited to see what is going to happen with these weird creatures. I've been thrilled to be with people like James Gunn, Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, Karen Gillan, Pom Klementieff, and Sean Gunn. They're just tremendously talented.

Movies like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and all of the MCU films, for us as actors, are so freaking interesting because you use your imagination more than ever before. You cannot really think about being in another universe or being an animal, but somehow when you go to set and you have somebody like James, who is guiding you and making you feel comfortable, you feel like you can be a child again. I felt like I was a kid, imagining that today I'm going to be a cat or tomorrow I'm going to be an astronaut, or I can just be a tree. It's a reminder of the child that we have in us that we sometimes forget exists. On top of everything, this cast is just really nice people, and you want to be around them because they're supporting and rooting for you. I love my character and I hope people like her as well because she's going to be just out there.

I'm so excited. Have you done voice acting before? No, I have not. I haven't done voice acting but I also didn't really do voice acting. I was spending a lot of time on set, and I was just playing it. Someone asked if I was okay with getting dirty. I was like, 'oh, hell no. I'm going to get dirty as hell.' It was very fun. Just being able to collaborate with these people, and I'm a huge Marvel fan. I can't hide it; it's been like a dream.

What I love about the projects that you're selecting is that there is such a difference between each one, but you're really honouring your Bulgarian heritage in films like *Women Do Cry* and the miniseries you're producing at this time called *Freedom or Death*. Has it always been important to you to share and highlight Bulgarian events and stories?

I think it's important to acknowledge and shine a little bit of light on places like Bulgaria and countries like mine to the rest of the world. Bulgaria, for example, has existed out there since the year 681AD. So, it's an ancient, ancient country with lots of events happening and a very strong religion that kept the population out there through a lot of occupations, wars, and everything. I feel like I'm proud to be called Bulgarian and I want to bring more eyes towards that country because it is beautiful, and the people are very much dedicated to everything they do. It's just interesting to share more stories, legends, myths, and events that haven't been shared because again, we are getting to the place where we're talking about cultural exchange which is crucial and important.

If you can get a story that is going to be universal, but it's pretty much centered around a place that you've never heard of is just thrilling for me. My producing partner, Julian Kostov, and I want to do a show based on historical events in my country

Halina at the beginning who told us to watch a French movie called *Raw*. It's from the same director that did *Titane* last year and won everything at the Cannes Film Festival. It was very interesting because it feels like this animalistic film about females and their hunger. It's a beautiful movie. Also, we watched *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and a couple of horror movies as well together as a group. I was thinking the whole time about *Wicked* because it also follows the story of 'the outsider'. In our film, we follow the outsider, we follow somebody that is like the new girl, a person that we don't know anything about.

I watched everything that A24 created before that like *Midsommar* and *Hereditary*. I think *Hereditary* felt a little bit more like our movie in a lot of ways. *The Shining* was also thematic because the place that we spent the most time at, which was a hotel in New York, felt very weird and felt like *The Shining*!

Is there a particular line or scene in the film that really stands out for you? For me, it's the scene where they lock you out and you go into the van. There's a certain shift Bee has in her mindset there, I think.

Those were the hardest scenes I've ever shot in my life. We were shooting only in the night. It was freezing cold; the wind and rain machines were creating such a horrifying sound. It felt like there was an alarm and the war was coming and it's the end of the world. I had so many layers of clothing on me and all of them got soaking wet and they became heavy, and I was freezing and shaking and feeling completely miserable. I think that's what Bee, my character, feels as well. It felt like very much a moment of a hero when she's screaming just a single name — she's just screaming the name of her girlfriend and the only person who she loves for real.

I have to ask: how many takes did it take to nail the scene where you slap Pete Davidson?

[Laughs] We had a stunt coordinator, but I think especially for our slapping scene, I had to do it for real. They trained me to do it in a way that I wasn't going to be hurtful towards him. I didn't want to hurt him because he's so freaking nice and generous and gentle. He's been one of the best people I've ever met in my life. It wasn't that many times, but he's just so funny and a great actor. He was so cool with it. I think we were shooting that scene for two or three days.

What a crazy scene — it's nuts. It's crazy. It's also a reflection of my generation and even younger generations that are testing to see what each other can handle. It's masochistic in a way, especially when people are around lots of privilege. They develop this instinct that they can survive and be even stronger. It's a power dynamic and they all want to do it. We can see Emma saying, 'okay, who's going to stop me?' And we can see Jordan like completely leaving it all. So, Bee is going to try to give it all as well because in the second round we see her with Sophie, and she is way different than the first time she did it. So somehow the background that you're around gets you and you transform consciously or subconsciously you just become one.

I know you can't talk much about this, but I know you are going to be voicing Cosmo the Spacedog in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.*



happening after 500 years of occupation. I just always want to go back there and work on something. I feel I got to the place that I live right now in Los Angeles, and I can see all of these palm trees, but at the same time, there are so many interesting stories from all around the world. Someday I want to go to China, another day I want to go to New Zealand or Australia or Turkey or Bulgaria. Bulgaria is my home at the end of the day, and I will always want to go back and invite people to visit, to watch, to get excited and inspired.

I know in Canada we learn a lot of Canadian history and a bit of American, but we don't get exposed to history outside of North America. We need art like movies to bring light to these events. Plus, there are so many things that we just don't really know because the history, I'm afraid, is so different in every country and every place that you teach, you learn so the only way that we can actually get a clear picture is by communicating and that can happen through making movies or music or art, somehow.

The best language. Yeah, it is. At the end of the day, all that will exist after our death is the art and this is a timeless piece somehow. I think Oscar Wao said that language kind of is like the source of misunderstanding so if you create a language that will be universal for all of us, based on things that are pretty much specific to a certain region, to a certain group of people, it's just beautiful.

Lastly, if you could manifest something for yourself this year, what would it be? My family, my friends and I to all be healthy and happy. That is it.

Beautiful. It's that simple. It really is!

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