

Zela Film & Grasshopper Film present:

# EAT YOUR CATFISH

United States, Spain, Turkey / 2021 / 74 min.

**A film by**

**Adam Isenberg, Noah Amir Arjomand & Senem Tüzen**

## PRESS NOTES

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#EatYourCatfish

## LOGLINE

Kathryn's ALS has left her paralyzed and her family's relations in tatters, but she holds on to see her daughter's wedding. With dark humor and extraordinary intimacy, this film probes the breakdown of a family's bonds and of a woman's will to live.

## SYNOPSIS

Years with ALS have left Kathryn paralyzed and needing 24-hour care. With her mind intact and having opted for mechanical breathing, she could live like this indefinitely. But the situation has embittered and alienated her husband Said, and proved too much for many nurses and aides. Her grown son Noah, who lives with Kathryn and Said in their New York City apartment, struggles to balance his academic obligations with those he feels to his mother. The disease has also been a destructive force complicating relations between everyone in her family. Kathryn often falls into despair, but she has been holding on to see her daughter's wedding day. This project draws on 930 hours of footage—all filmed without any crew present from a fixed camera from Kathryn's point of view. The result is a profoundly intimate, layered and wryly funny portrait of a family at its breaking point.



## DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

This film is structured as a first-person account of Kathryn's final stage before death. It is, in its totality, her plea for the wider world to understand what she went through, why she persisted, and finally why she gave up. So, rather than turning and looking at Kathryn, or asking others to sit down and tell us about her, we aim to bring the viewer as close as possible to actually being Kathryn and experiencing what she experienced.

Through Kathryn's own narration, we enter the inner world of a severely disabled woman and mother facing her own mortality. We wanted to break from earlier documentaries on these themes by telling a true story, without contrived heroics, of the brutality of the daily challenges—both practical and emotional—of in-home care for a disabled and terminally ill person.

We hope viewers' assumptions and feelings will shift as the film progresses from pinning all the blame on any one family member to appreciating that each, in their way, is responsible for their collective pain and each, in turn, is to be forgiven for their shortcomings. Kathryn's story should also have particular resonance at this unique global moment where we all have faced isolation and the fear of a lonely death.

*Senem Tüzen & Adam Isenberg, Noah Amir Arjomand*



## PRODUCTION NOTES

We wanted this film to be completely from Kathryn's point of view. In order to achieve this, we used a special rig to record extended takes in 4K with eight microphones, which was locked in a frame looking out from just behind her head. With no crew present for filming, the protagonists quickly became indifferent to the camera's presence. This close collaboration with the protagonists allowed us to capture close to a thousand hours of hyper-realistic footage containing profoundly intimate, revelatory moments that flesh out a complex and entangled emotional landscape and a slow but inevitable breakdown of relations.

What is more, Kathryn's inner monologue—drawn from interviews and bits of her own correspondences, forum posts, and so on—means she speaks directly to the viewer, sharing her innermost feelings on her condition, her family, life, death and even how she hopes the film will be received. The effect of this approach is to forge a tight bond between the viewer and Kathryn, a severely disabled woman, while offering a nearly first-hand experience of an important and rarely witnessed dimension of family life.

The film's rich soundscape is drawn from ambient music and sounds from her wheelchair and breathing device, off-camera sounds from family members, street traffic, and so on. Distortive mood sounds enhance a sense of claustrophobia, dread, resignation and foreboding.

This project's production structure is also unusual: Directorship is shared by three filmmakers, one of which is a principle character; it draws on 930 hours of footage, all of which was shot without any crew present; the director of production, Noah Amir Arjomand, recused himself from a role in post-production, which is directed by the filmmaking team of Adam Isenberg and Senem Tüzen. This collaboration allowed us to wed an insider's access to an outsider's perspective and expertise.

Noah wanted to make a film about his mother's condition and his family's experience with in-home care. He approached Adam with the concept and test footage from a wheelchair-mounted camera after seeing and appreciating Adam's earlier film, *A Life Without Words*, which also explored disability and the inner dynamics of a family struggling to survive.

Noah took sole responsibility for all 930 hours of filming. He would press Record on the camera and microphone array that he mounted to his mother's wheelchair and then simply let life in the apartment proceed for up to thirteen hours of continuous shooting. There was no crew present, further enhancing the uninterrupted hyperrealism of the scenes. Adam and Senem—who have been collaborating as filmmakers for more than a decade—directed the post-production.





## SCREENINGS

IDFA (**world premiere, Envision Competition**)

DocPoint Helsinki

Santa Barbara IFF

Full Frame IDF

Istanbul IFF (**Best Doc, National Competition**)

Taiwan IDF

Millenium Docs Against Gravity

One World Romania

DocAviv

Biografilm

Sheffield Doc/Fest

Heartland IFF, USA

One World Romania in Timisoara

Antenna IDF, Australia (**Best Film,**

**International Competition**)

Screening Rights Film Festival, UK

Rendezvous with Madness, Canada

Leeds IFF

Central Scotland DFF

Kasseler Dokfest

Budapest IDF

Festival Imagésanté

"Some of the most discomfiting marital arguments ever captured on screen, in fiction or otherwise...Co-director Noah Arjomand chronicles his own mother's struggle with the degenerative disease to courageously intimate, brutally moving effect...an unusually unsentimental, everyday document of ALS, tender in the expressly painful manner of a fresh bruise..."

**Guy Lodge, [VARIETY](#)**

"Crucially, the film gives Kathryn a platform to tell — and indeed show — her story, in her own unique way. Her lingering hope is that viewers don't think she's pathetic, but plucky. Painstakingly edited by Adam Isenberg and Senem Tuzen, this film grants her that wish."

**Nikki Baughan, [SCREEN DAILY](#)**

"An astonishingly open, moving, funny and challenging insight into the world of a woman paralysed but with her mind intact, *Eat Your Catfish* is remarkable in portraying an intimate and powerful portrait of a family stretched to its very breaking point."

**Mark Adams, [BUSINESS DOC EUROPE](#)**

## RECOGNITION

**Emmy® Nominee**

Outstanding Social Issues Documentary

45th News & Documentary Emmys

## REVIEWS

"One of the most emotionally enthralling cinematic experiences you will ever have. It will leave you vibrating with anger and sympathy, but also joy and hope."

**Christopher Lloyd, [FILM YAP](#)**

"Kathryn does not mince words, even though she can only communicate via eye movements due to the muscular disease ALS... Kathryn retains her sharp wit and her humour, but it is a grueling existence for her and her loved ones. Rarely has a film about illness offered such a revealing look at what more breaks down besides the body."

**Pauline Kleijer, [DE VOLKSKRANT](#)**

"At the end of the day, with all the hardships and challenges that are shown throughout the documentary, the pursuit of happiness remains intact for Kathryn and all parties involved [in taking] care of her... Kathryn demonstrated insurmountable odds of patience and willpower to get through each day living through a dysfunctional family, which serves a great amount of inspiration for audience members to appreciate what one is capable of [to overcome] the odds." **Henry Tran, [UNIVERSAL CINEMA](#)**

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

### Adam Isenberg

Adam Isenberg's debut documentary, *A Life Without Words* (2011), winner of the Margaret Mead Filmmaker Award, told the story of two deaf siblings in rural Nicaragua who had been denied access to a sign-language community. Like *Eat Your Catfish*, it explored complex family dynamics, limits of communication, and questions of belonging. During ten years living in Turkey, Isenberg hosted and, along with Senem Tüzen, co-created and co-directed the long-running travel documentary series *Adem'in Seyir Defteri* on Turkish State television. He also co-produced and co-edited Tüzen's debut fiction feature *Motherland* (2015), which premiered at the 30th Venice International Film Critics' Week, and earned two FIPRESCI prizes, among other accolades. He is from California, lives in Barcelona, and holds Spanish citizenship.



#### **Filmography:**

##### **Ana Yurdu (2015) - producer/editor**

Best Editing - Turkish Film Critics' Association

Best Editing - 27th Ankara Int'l Film Festival

##### **A Life Without Words (2011) - director/cinematographer**

Best Film – 36th Margaret Mead Film Festival, New York

Best Documentary – 24th Cinelatino Film Festival, Toulouse

Best Documentary - CineDeaf Rome Int'l Deaf Film Festival

Best Film - 12th Maine Deaf Film Festival

### Noah Amir Arjomand

Noah Amir Arjomand is an Iranian-American sociologist with degrees from Columbia and Princeton universities. He is currently a chancellor's distinguished fellow in creative writing and writing for the performing arts at the University of California - Riverside. Noah's photography has been published in *The Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, and *PBS Frontline*. Cambridge University Press published his first book, *Fixing Stories*, on news fixers who assist foreign journalists in Turkey and Syria, in 2022. *Eat Your Catfish* is his film debut.



## Senem Tüzen

Senem Tüzen was born in Ankara and has a degree in Film & Television from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul. She lives in Barcelona with Spanish residency. Her debut film *Motherland* (2015), which she also wrote, plumbed the depths of a layered and dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship in an Anatolian village. It premiered at Venice Critics' Week and won multiple international and domestic awards including Best Film, Best Directing and Best Script from the Turkish Film Critics' Association. She produced and edited Adam Isenberg's documentary *A Life Without Words* (2011). Her second fiction feature, which is set in Barcelona, is in development.



### **Filmography:**

#### **Motherland (2015) - director/scriptwriter**

Venice Critics' Week

FIPRESCI - Warsaw Int'l Film Festival

FIPRESCI - Istanbul Film Festival

Best Film +5 other awards - Ankara Int'l Film Festival

Best Film - 16th Tbilisi Int'l Film Festival

Best Script - Asia Pacific Screen Awards

Best Film +4 other awards - Turkish Film Critics' Association

#### **A Life Without Words (2011) - producer/editor**

#### **Arpeggio Ante Lucem - short (2010) - cinematographer**

61st Berlin Int'l Film Festival

#### **Milk & Chocolate - short (2008) - director/scriptwriter**

Best Short Film nominee 2009 - Turkish Film Critics' Association

#### **Unus Mundus - short (2008) - director/scriptwriter**

Best Short Film 2009 - Turkish Film Critics' Association



## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

Founded in 2011 by Senem Tüzen and Adam Isenberg, Zela Film is a boutique production company dedicated to arthouse films—both documentary and fiction—with a focus on dramatic, personal storytelling grounded in philosophical and psychoanalytic themes. It has led Turkish and international co-productions from development to distribution for television and cinematic release. Titles include Motherland (2015 - Venice Critics' Week), A Life Without Words (Cinelatino Toulouse, Best Doc), and Eat Your Catfish (2021 - IDFA Envision Competition).

## CREDITS

**Directors, producers** Adam Isenberg, Noah Amir Arjomand & Senem Tüzen

**Production** Zela Film

**Cinematography** Noah Amir Arjomand

**Editing** Adam Isenberg, Senem Tüzen

**Sound recording** Noah Amir Arjomand

**Sound design** Adrian Lo

**Music** Daniel Whitworth

# **SALES**

## **WORLD SALES**

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Press notes EAT YOUR CATFISH