

# Poetry film at JÁ FEST in Lisbon

a review of the festival and conversation with the Já founders by Janet Lees

Running from 10 to 18 April 2023 in Lisbon, JÁ FEST was a theatre festival with a difference: the difference being that it had an entire segment dedicated to poetry film. I had the privilege of chairing the judging panel for the poetry film competition, running a workshop at the festival, and taking part in one of the screening evening Q&A sessions. On behalf of Liberated Words I put together a review of the poetry film section of the festival and interviewed two of the four Já founders.

## Já International Theatre

In Portuguese the word 'Já' means 'here and now'. Founded in 2017 by Dan Cotterall, Tania Kumeda, Suresh Nampuri and Margarida Rocha, this artistic association is dedicated to performing innovative English language theatre in Lisbon. As well as hosting mainstage productions, staged readings and workshops, the Já team are passionate about experimenting with other professionals from around the world who enjoy pushing the boundaries of the theatrical medium.

## The festival

JÁ FEST was the biggest event hosted by Já to date; an extravaganza of onstage theatre, workshops, talks, poetry film, and an exhibition plus panel discussion dedicated to four brave women journalists. All this was made possible by EU support through the Theatre in Palm platform. The poetry film element of the festival took the form of three screenings, on April 12, 13 and 15, as well as Q&A sessions with the judges and a poetry film workshop. The 34 selected films were shown at two outstanding venues: the multidisciplinary arts hub Cossoul and Casa Fernando Pessoa, the last place the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa lived and now a museum and cultural centre dedicated to him.



Screening at Casa Fernando Pessoa

This two-minute film gives a flavour of the poetry film events  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NECZ1dkJXzI>

The whole festival was imbued with a strong sense of creativity, collaboration and respect, as well as great vitality – all qualities I was struck by in the Já founders. This was an event created by people who care as deeply for people as they do for the arts; curators who are acutely aware and respectful of the sensibilities of artists. Wrapped around this hive of wholehearted creativity was the unique energy of Lisbon itself, a light-filled, high-spirited gem of a city, with inspiration at every corner. It's easy to see why so many people, not least artists and creatives, are increasingly choosing to make this place home.



Poetry film workshop at Cossoul (Janet Lees foreground right)

It was interesting to see such a diverse mix of submitted films, ranging from straightforward visual narratives – the film literally illustrating the poem – to more nuanced interpretations. There were slick professional production values alongside obviously homemade pieces (and in my opinion, none the worse for that – many great videopoems have been filmed on mobile phones and put together with basic editing software). It's clear that poetry film is still finding its way as a genre and for me, the more successful films were those that went for lateral rather than literal translations of the poems they were showcasing. The winning films were all great examples of this.



Suresh Nampuri, Já co-founder and JÁ FEST coordinator in Lisbon, at the awards night at Cossoul



Judges Janet Lees and Pedro Caldeira

This short video gives a flavour of awards night, a wonderfully intimate and creative evening at Cossoul <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ulisbk7GHA>

For those who couldn't get to the festival, and to give the winning and selected films the opportunity to live and breathe together for longer, the Já team created an online viewing gallery <https://fest2023.jait.pt/poetry-film-gallery>

### **The poetry film competition and screening selection**

As part of the open call for the poetry film competition, Tania, Dan, Suresh and I had a conversation about poetry film to help give newcomers to the genre some pointers. You can watch that conversation at <https://fest2023.jait.pt/poetry-film/> – scroll down the page to see the video.

The open call was for films in two categories. The theme of the main category was 'Separation and Belonging'. The theme of second category was 'Disquiet! Said Pessoa', taking inspiration from Fernando Pessoa and his master work 'The Book of Disquiet'. Pessoa was an extraordinary poet who created and wrote as many different 'heteronyms': distinct personas with detailed biographies and greatly varied voices. 81 poetry films flowed in from 20 countries. 34 of these were selected to screen at the festival, a task overseen by Tania – who had overall responsibility for the poetry film segment of the festival – with the support of Dan and Suresh. It was then down to the three judges to decide on the overall winners from a shortlist of 10 finalists. The standards were extremely high and there was much discussion and some agonising before we came to a decision on the winners and finalists.

## The winning films, 'Separation & Belonging' category

### First prize

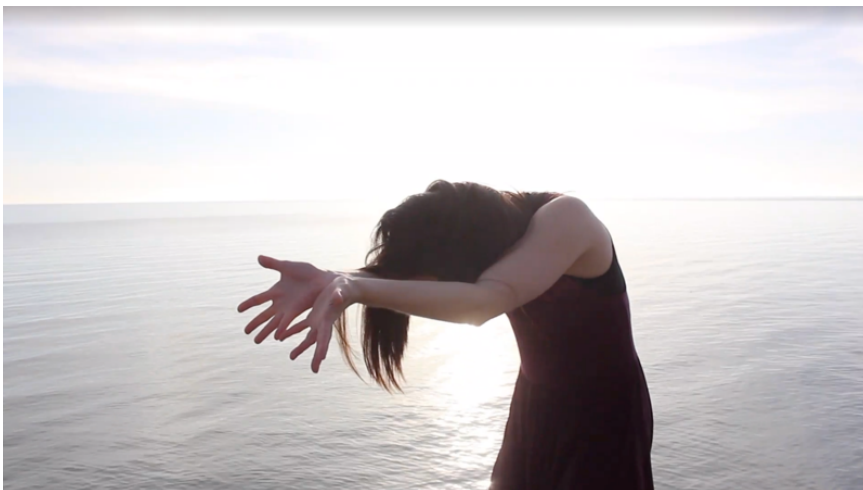
*How to Outline Grief* – Kym McDaniel, USA



*How to Outline Grief*

A profoundly affecting film in which different water worlds – sea, snow, tears, bodies – collide as grief is poetically explored through movement and landscape.

The judges said, "With each successive viewing this film embedded itself more deeply in us. It combines voice, text, image and sound with great sensitivity and palpable personal feeling. Grief cannot be adequately expressed in words; the filmmaker captures the changing faces of her loss through body language, domestic scenes and, as time passes, more abstract animation. An exquisite meditation on grief and, more than that, it transforms something that for all of us is a lonely journey into a connecting experience."



*How to Outline Grief*



Speaking about her practice, Kym said, "As an experimental filmmaker, choreographer and performer, I am mainly interested in using movement and gesture to explore the vulnerability of living in a sick and disabled body. I began filmmaking after a head injury in my early 20s prevented me from pursuing dance as a formal performance career. My films are rooted in personal and reference experimental cinema, dance film, and narrative storytelling."

Watch Kym's film, and hear her talking about it, in this video interview recorded by the Já team after the festival <https://youtu.be/LV57vyr60Qc>

## Second prize

*Changing Skin* – Maxime Coton, Belgium



Maxime is an award-winning writer and director who aims for a balance between the poetic and the political in his work. His multidisciplinary approach has led him to create transmedia environments. Featuring one such environment, this film is a mesmerising and momentous meditation on the fact that we are little miracles. Maxime's synopsis states, "Alone, we shed our skins over and over, with no memory of what drove us into this life. These skins belong neither to us or to others, regardless of the energy we expend, at night, exchanging them."



*Changing Skin*

The judges said, "A rewarding slow burn of a film poem which builds and builds into something momentous. WE are momentous creations, yet so often remain blind to this. The whole film is suffused with a sense of obfuscation which comes through in the restless, shifting repetitions of an evocative abstracted soundscape and a brilliantly cohesive visual treatment which spans the microscopic and macrocosmic."

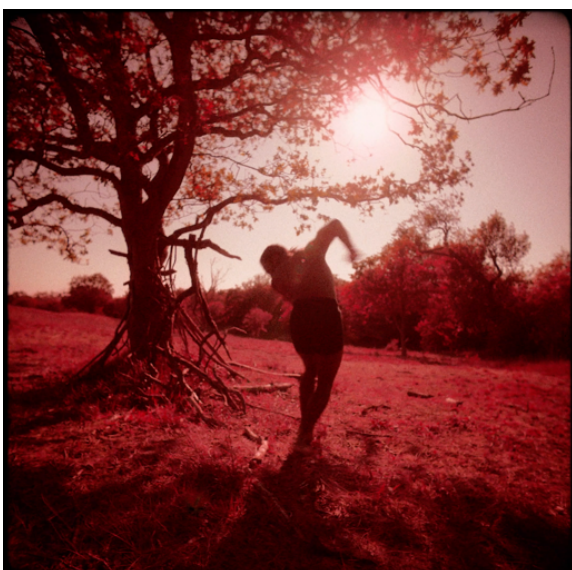
### Special mention

Memory – Bauke Brower, the Netherlands



Memory

This dynamic and beautifully fluid dance-based film is inspired by a poem by Ngūgī wa Thiong’o, in which a man needs to confront his past before he can move on. Dutch-born, South African-raised Bauke has more than 20 years’ experience as a director and editor. His focus and passion are on what he sees as the humble yet profound craft of storytelling. His vision is to create work that will build a genuine connection with the viewer.



Memory

The judges said, "A sensitive and seamless interweaving of spoken commentary and body language – physical poetry – to create a beautifully coherent work. The film travels on a huge journey, from

subjugation to freedom of expression, in just a few minutes, in a way that imprints itself on our memories, as viewers.”

## The winning films, 'Disquiet! Said Pessoa' category

The second theme for entries was inspired by Pessoa's master work, *The Book of Disquiet*. Writing in the introduction, Jeronimo Pizarro says, "The Book of Disquiet is one of the most astonishing portraits of the city of Lisbon, a successive accumulation of words and images that intertwine and complement each other in the reader's visual representation."

Having bought and randomly dipped into the book – this really is the best way to read it – I can see why it's described as astonishing; some of the most luminous lyrical prose I've ever read, which reaches into your soul and makes you feel, and question, everything. Pessoa was an incredible poet, thinker and deeply fascinating human being.

### First prize

*Build me a Cottage* – Pat van Boeckel, the Netherlands



*Build me a Cottage*

This sublime work by Pat van Boeckel and Peter van der Pol is based on a poem of the same name by Fernando Pessoa, writing as his English heteronym Alexander Search. In his video art Pat examines the intertwined relation between humans and their environment, with the embodied experience of time and place being a central concern. This shines through in *Build me a Cottage*, which was filmed in an abandoned Portuguese wool factory. The film has the feeling of a dream, heightened by the presence of a stunning art installation in the abandoned factory, into which the protagonist descends to sleep, as if into a waiting, welcome grave.





*Build me a Cottage*

The judges said, "This is a film poem which begins and ends with startling images and creeps quietly into your heart during the walk between them. A beautifully felt rendering of Pessoa's poem, which captures his words laterally rather than literally, and a stunning collaboration between filmmaker and installation artist."

Watch Pat's film, and hear him talking about it, in this video interview with the Já team

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOu0lvCTv44>

### Special Mention

*Personafication* – Quaresma Vieira, Portugal



*Personafication*

This vivacious and engaging experimental film uses stop-motion, long exposures and light-graffiti to explore the possible paths Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms would have walked around Lisbon, accompanied by a found poem using their words.



With photographers for parents, Ricardo started exhibiting at the age of 15 and was sponsored by the Portuguese National Film Institution to produce and direct his first film 'Today was tomorrow'. His work in film and photography ranges from fashion to celebrity portraits, and he is determined to keep exploring creatively through visual, social and post-contemporary art.



*Personafication*

The judges said, "This film references and riffs with the words of Pessoa and his main heteronyms with great energy and wit. The crackling soundtrack, flickering visuals and graffiti-like text combine to embody a restless, insatiably curious mind – multiple souls within one person."

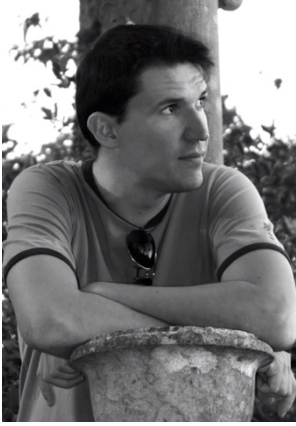
### The finalists

- One Step Away – Caroline Rumley, USA
- Llanto Congelado (Frozen Cry) – Charles Olsen, Spain
- Autonomy: The Journey of Becoming – Maryam Imogen Ghouth, United Arab Emirates
- Alcatraz – Micha Kunze, Germany
- Irgenwas Ist Immer – Micha Kunze, Germany
- Things you have forgotten to take with you – Elena Baucke, Italy
- Lost Upon Arrival – Ethan Mooney, New Zealand
- How to Outline Grief – Kym McDaniel, USA
- Changing Skin – Maxime Coton, Belgium
- Memory – Bauke Brower, The Netherlands
- Build Me a Cottage – Pat van Boeckel, The Netherlands
- Personafication – Quaresma Vieira, Portugal

### The judging panel

The first round of selections, of the films to be screened at the festival, was undertaken by Já co-founder Tania Kumeda, with the support of fellow co-founders Dan Cotterall and Suresh Nampuri. Faced with the difficult task of choosing the winners and finalists was the three-strong judging panel:

**Pedro Caldeira** – a Portuguese filmmaker and co-founder of Tripé, which produces films, web series and video art. Tripé's work has been selected for festivals such as the Napoli Film Festival, Filmapalloza Atlanta, Filmapalloza Paris, FIKE, Ymotion and Shortcutz, winning awards in competitions including the 48 Hour Film Project in Castelo Branco and Lisbon. Pedro is a jury member of PLANOS, Tomar's International Short Film Festival.



Pedro Caldeira

**Janet Lees** – a poet and lens-based artist whose film works have been selected for many festivals and screenings, including the ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival, the Aesthetica Art Prize and Festival Fotogenia. In 2021 she won the Ó Bhéal Poetry-Film competition. Her poetry is widely published and anthologised, and her art photography has been exhibited around the world.



Janet Lees

**Paulo Tavares** – a Portuguese poet, editor, translator and co-founder of Artefacto Edições and Reverso – Encontro de Autores, Artistas e Editores Independentes. Currently completing a PhD in Literary Studies, Paulo has had several poetry books published and his latest, Órbitas, is due in 2023. His work as a literary translator runs from Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift to Ray Bradbury and Viet Thanh Nguyen.



Paulo Tavares

## Interview with the JÁ International Theatre founders

I asked some questions of two of the four JÁ founders, Tania Kumeda and Dan Cotterall, to delve deeper into their motivation for making poetry film such a significant part of their theatre festival.

**Tania Kumeda** is an artist, stage director, event manager and avid movie-goer from Ukraine. Drawing her inspiration from words, images and memories, she completed a Master's degree in Foreign Languages & Literature in her native city of Kyiv, where she has remained since February 24, 2022. For three years, Tania was a leading actress at the Kyiv Theatre of Comedy, and in 2017 she directed JÁ's inaugural show RED in Lisbon. Tania was unable to be in Lisbon for the festival, but did an incredible job behind the scenes.



Tania Kumeda

**Dan Cotterall** studied literature in New Zealand and Oxford, gaining a First Class BA Hons and M.Phil, before spending two decades as a management consultant in the UK, Tunisia, France, China and Portugal. In JÁ's inaugural production in Lisbon in 2017, he played the role of Smirnov in *The Bear* and Simone in Wilde's *A Florentine Tragedy*, directed by Tania. As he is currently an associate professor at Shanghai International Studies University, he wasn't able to be in Lisbon for the festival either, but like Tania he supported it to the hilt from afar.



Dan Cotterall

*Dan, the vision for Já, as well as raising your profile in Europe as a theatrical entity, is to create the Já International Art Space. On your website you say, "As well as being a performance space, this venue will include audio & visual exhibits by up-and-coming as well as established artists, with the atmosphere generated by each activity feeding and elevating the experience of the others." Could you tell us some more about this cross-fertilisation of different art forms, and how poetry film fits into your ethos?*

Watch and listen to Dan's answer  
<https://vimeo.com/862888776>

*Tania, the themes for the festival's poetry film competition were 'Separation and Belonging' and 'Disquiet! Said Pessoa'. Could you tell us about how these came into being, and what they mean to Já – and to you personally?*

The theme 'Separation and Belonging' was inspired by a thought that has lived with me for a very long time: until we parted we did not know we could feel so strongly, we did not know that our good memories could shrivel and vanish, that we may no longer find comfort in them. Through separation we learn a lot about ourselves and our world. And the distance only reinforces senses and memories...Distance from home, from loved one, from beliefs and from dreams.

This thought was born due to my experience of living in Lisbon as a foreigner, and now my reluctance to leave home that has only been reinforced during the war in my native Ukraine. I used to think that even in the worst times we could find comfort in memories and resurrect our shoe boxes with Polaroids or little memory compartments in our minds, as if nothing can take them away from us. But facing danger can make memories simply vanish, and shoe boxes can burn to ashes. So, it all started very personally for me. In the first weeks of the Russian invasion, for the first time in my life, I felt separated from memories. This coincided with the time we were working on the festival theme

There was also this intuitive feeling about people responding to the theme poetically with their own interpretations – and also about memories doing both good and bad by liberating and ensnaring people. When people move to other places, they take tactile memories with them; survival kits, a sense of home inside their bag packed with dear little things. So many of us can relate to this. A poetry film reminds me of this bag!

And yet, separation alone was not enough. One summer afternoon Dan and I were Zoom chatting about the theme being incomplete..."You separate only to be back to or discover where you want to be..." And Dan said at once: "That's belonging" ...And so it is!

The 'Disquiet' theme – 'Desassossego' in Portuguese – came from Suresh. It is a sacred word in Portugal and we wanted to encourage more artists to feel Fernando Pessoa and his extraordinary Book of Disquiet. We were so lucky to team up with an iconic venue, Casa Fernando Pessoa, to pay homage to Pessoa and infuse Lisbon with poetic voices from filmmakers so that Pessoa's words could resonate in his birthplace.

In our turbulent world, themes can give a sense of home and safety. Poetry films are little houses filled with the most important things in the shape of words, images and sounds. Also, our themes gave a sense of home to the festival itself. So there was this strong inner call to contribute to stories and memories that will stay in our fragile world beyond us. The three of us brought three words – Separation, Belonging and Disquiet – as an invitation for artists to explore whole worlds behind them.



The footage for Kym McDaniel's winning film, 'How to outline grief' rested on a shelf for six years until Kym was inspired to give it a new screen life after seeing the JÁ entry call. She told us, "As soon as I saw the topic, I knew I wanted to apply. It spoke to the film, but it really spoke to me – separated from dance but desperately wanting to belong."

Bauke Brouwer, whose film 'Memory' won a Special Mention, said, "Most festivals are just 'Submit your film' and then you feel like you are submitting a thing which is very personal to a big machine. If it is a theme-based, it feels a bit more niche, a bit more personal, I think"

Ultimately, the official selection embraced love letters to homeland, romances, loss, unfulfilled love, balancing dreams and reality, searching for and keeping your identity in colonized states, nostalgia and longing for a new start, retreating to nature in the turbulent times and much more.

***Tania, I know that a surprising 'sub-theme' also emerged, and it would be interesting to hear about that too.***

It was a revelation that the sea was a leitmotif in so many of the films we received – even a protagonist! And this suits Lisbon so well, the city that lives by the sea. It is mesmerizing that artists found it healing to tell stories through water worlds, where the water was a narrative canvas between spaces, times, flashbacks and flashforwards. And the sea is both a separating and uniting element. It is truly special that all these themes shared the screen together in our family of films. But at the same time, of course, each film was absolutely individual.

I liked to imagine that people might come to the screenings from the seaside, with sand in their shoes or salty wind in their hair, and then watch a film they can connect with on a very tactile and emotional level.

***Dan, what do you feel makes a great poetry film?***

Watch and listen to Dan's answer  
<https://vimeo.com/862893322>

***Tania, as overseer of the poetry film segment of the festival, and a member of the selection panel, how did you approach the task of choosing the films that would screen in Lisbon? What were you looking for in particular?***

As this project was brought to life and commissioned by the EU programme 'Theatre in Palm' for emerging artists, we wanted to support emerging poetry filmmakers, as specified in the submission call. But we also welcomed all!

We were working as a team, but I am very grateful to Dan and Suresh, who entrusted me with the final selection and sequencing. Personally, I was looking for a story and for feelings within a story. We feel it is very important not to lose the power of words, which is why we specified on-screen text – the films could be any language but had to be subtitled in English. But I soon realised that words can be silent and imagined, and with every new submission came a revelation!

We were looking for resonance with the theme, of course, as well as for original footage and original poems, or creative reimagining of footage from another source, and how it was entwined with the poetry; and the way it was entwined into poetry.

Also, film duration mattered, as we wanted to show as many stories as possible across the three screening days. Initially we talked of 5 minutes' duration, and I am very happy we extended this to 7 minutes. Otherwise, we would have missed several amazing films, including 'The City in My Chest', by Kazz Torabyeh and Hisham Bustani, a poetic nod to contemporary issues including individualism; 'Someone Should Tell Them', by Dorothee Karekezi, which explores vulnerability as a mixed race woman; and Kym McDaniel's winning film 'How to Outline Grief'.

We were also looking for a diverse range of films and contrasting stories, and were very happy to have a rich mix of black & white films, mood pieces, spoken word, experimental films, love letters on screen, animation, collage poetry and ekphrastic poetry.

Even more challenging than the initial selection was editing the films into a sequence without giving the impression that what the audience is watching is one long film, or that every story continues the one before. I didn't want to influence the viewer's perception, as every film has an individual voice. And it was crucial to make sure that the audience had time to breathe in between each film. I wanted to find the right rhythm for the sequences so that every film was a new heartbeat. Here I guess, the rhythm of the waves became a salvation and...very much I was thinking of the tides.

### **A final word from Tania Kumeda**

I am overwhelmed with gratitude to the poets and filmmakers who responded to our themes in their unique and profound ways. We didn't want to part company with artists too soon when the offline screenings were over, so with their permission, we are happy to welcome you to our online Poetry Film Gallery <https://fest2023.jait.pt/poetry-film-gallery/>. Here you can enjoy the entire in-competition programme in both categories, plus two out-of-competition films by Janet Lees, which we also screened at JÁ FEST.