

# FIRE UNDER THE SNOW

Directed by Makoto Sasa  
USA/Japan, 75 minutes  
*<http://www.fireunderthesnow.com/>*

**Publicity:**

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## Synopsis

Arrested by the Chinese Communist Army in 1959, Palden Gyatso spent 33 years in prisons and labor camps for the “crime” of peaceful demonstration. Tortured, starved and sentenced to hard labor, he watched his nation and culture destroyed, his teachers, friends and family displaced, jailed or killed. The film covers Palden's birth in 1933, and follows him through the Orwellian nightmare that began with the Chinese invasion. It explores the escalating cycle of interrogation and physical violation that ended decades later with Palden's escape from Tibet, and a cathartic meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India.

During his imprisonment, sometimes the mere thought of being reunited with the Dalai Lama was a beacon of hope for Palden and other fellow prisoners. The film investigates the basis of Palden's resilience, who claims that his faith in Buddhism, and education as a monk helped him survive. Despite the atrocities that befell him, he harbors no anger toward the Chinese, and believes it is part of his 'karma.'

At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Palden participated in an indefinite hunger strike. Using this highly publicized and symbolic event, an attempt is made to draw public attention to Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. We see first hand, Palden's dedication to the cause, his mentoring of the young Tibetan hunger strikers, and his emotional recollections of lost comrades.

Fire Under the Snow reveals the contours of an inspirational story: It is the survival of a mind and soul under unthinkable duress.

## Director's Statement

I am a Tokyo-born woman who has been trying to apply Buddhist philosophy to the challenges of hectic everyday life in New York City. One day, I heard an incredible story about a Tibetan Buddhist monk who was a political prisoner for 33 years, but finally escaped. Later, I read his remarkable autobiography *Fire Under the Snow* - and was hooked. Palden Gyatso's traumatic life story, intertwined as it is with the tragedy of Tibet, began haunting me. Looking at his gentle face on the book cover, seeing him smile tenderly with hands joined in prayer, I struggled to reconcile this warm presence with the bitter life recounted in the book. I tried to imagine how a return to relative normalcy was even possible after spending more than half his life under nightmare conditions. How could he still smile with such compassion? It put the concerns of my small life in the big city into a completely different perspective.

Inside of three months I was in Dharamsala with my film crew, and I found Palden Gyatso. Palden is now 75 years old and lives alone. His kindness and gentle manner are not some Tantric magic, but spring from simple, daily Buddhist practice cultivated over a lifetime – an insistence on seeing the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings, and working for their liberation unto his last breath. In our conversations, he was very humble regarding his own story, seeming almost removed from the events at times. However, reminiscences about friends starved or tortured to death, driven to suicide or still in prison, caused him to break down into heart-rending sobs: this is a legacy of pain beyond pain.

Today, open international support of Tibet is declining in the face of a gold rush into the ascendant Chinese economy. World leaders do not feel they can “afford” to challenge Beijing on the basis of human rights, for fear of incurring economic retaliation.

However, Palden Gyatso's life story transcends notions of religion or political movements, and speaks to our entire earthbound condition. He accommodated suffering, but did not capitulate to it; this is not only his triumph, it is a story that needs re-telling in every generation. The pain and war of our own times and minds make this all the more evident.

## FILMMAKER BIOS

### ***Makoto Sasa — Director & Producer***

Makoto Sasa studied Media at Keio University in Japan, and moved to New York City in 1998, where she received the M.A. in Media Studies from New School University. She has made several short documentaries, worked as assistant editor for the 35mm features "Going Under" (2003) starring Roger Rees, and "LOVE" (2004). She was the editor and associate producer for a feature documentary about a Japanese Photographer. It won the Best Editing Award at the Honolulu International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at the Brooklyn International Film Festival, got theatrical and TV distribution in the U.S., Japan, Canada, and the U.K. Recently, Makoto has been directing and editing several documentaries for Sony Japan's broadband streaming video website "World Event Village".

### ***Vladan Nikolic — Co-Producer***

Vladan Nikolic is an award winning filmmaker and writer from Belgrade, Yugoslavia, who now lives in New York. Before coming to New York, Mr. Nikolic worked as a director for Studio B, the first independent TV network in Yugoslavia, and wrote and directed films and documentaries. His awards include the TV Sarajevo Award and Zeta Film Award for Best Screenplay, Eastman Kodak Award for his film Serendipity, Telluride Indiefest Best film Award for his feature Burn, and others. Burn (2001) prompted Amy Taubin of the Village Voice to write that "Vladan Nikolic proves himself a director to watch with this intense, nightmare thriller about Yugoslavian refugees in New York." He recently produced the feature film Going Under (2004), starring Roger Rees, and wrote, directed, and co-produced the feature film Love (2005), which premiered at the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival, and went on to play the Venice Film Festival. Mr. Nikolic also teaches Film Directing, Production and Digital Filmmaking at The New School, and at New York University.

### ***Jim Browne — Co-Producer***

Jim Browne has been programming and producing film and video projects in New York City for the past 18 years. He currently runs Argot Pictures, a distribution/production company that specializes in theatrical releases and consulting for independent films. He is also Associate Programmer for the Tribeca Film Festival as well as the curator of Divine Lens, an on-line film series promoting the work of women documentary filmmakers that is part of divinecaroline.com. He is on the Board of Directors of Rooftop Films.

***Lincoln Maguire — Associate Producer, Camera B***

Lincoln Maguire is a self-taught professional working as a freelance Videographer / First Assistant Camera for the past ten years. A native New Yorker, he graduated from Fordham University in 1998. His career began in 1992, working for a large broadcast video rental company. With a concentration in SD & HD video, his work encompasses a wide range of film genres including documentaries, narratives, shorts, music videos and a recent 48hr film festival competition. Some of his most memorable experiences working in the business include coverage of singer Bono Vox of U2 at the Simon Weisenthal Humanitarian Award dinner in 2002, an interview with Henry Kissinger for an Israeli TV documentary in 2003, and a private concert performance by Sir Paul McCartney at the Highline Ballroom in 2007.

***Milica Zec — Editor***

Milica Zec was born in Belgrade, Serbia. She graduated with a degree in Film and TV editing at the University of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. After graduating she received "Slavko Vorkapich" award for Best Student Editor. Due to her successful editing work, Berlin Film Festival invited her to participate in Berlinale Talent Campus in 2005. She wrote scripts, edited and directed numerous short fiction and documentary films. She also worked as an editor on various projects from music videos, commercials and TV shows to fiction and documentary TV series. She is a member of The Association of Film and Television Artists in Belgrade. She currently resides in New York, where she is developing her international career.

***Aaron Mendez - Co-Writer***

Aaron Mendez is a polymathic creative person whose work spans the fields of music composition, film sound, text editing and internet technologies. His music has been heard worldwide via Public Radio International, in concert halls from San Antonio to Boulder to Boston, and in New York clubs and Off-Broadway theaters. Awards include: The Jazz Composers Alliance Julius Hemphill Jazz Composition Award (2001), The John Lennon Songwriting Competition (1999), The New England Conservatory Commencement Concert Competition (1994, alma mater). Mendez serves on the Advisory Board of the Creative Music Foundation (Woodstock), and has been a Screen Actor's Guild member since 1979.

***Vladimir Subotic — Director of Photography***

Award winning cinematographer Vladimir Subotic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. His professional career began in 1995 in Cyprus with TV commercials and music videos.

He has worked on short and feature films, which have been screened at numerous international film festivals. He received the Kodak Visions of Light Best Cinematography Award at the 2004 Los Angeles International Short Film Festival.

## **FIRE UNDER THE SNOW**

### **CREW LIST**

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**Director/Producer.....Makoto Sasa**

**Producers.....Jim Browne, Vlad Nikolic**

**Editor.....Milica Zec**

**Cinematography.....Vlad Subotic, Lincoln Maguire, Makoto Sasa**

**Associate Producers.....Lincoln Maguire, Aaron Mendez, Tiffany Ryan**

**Sound Design..... Aleksandar Protic**

**Music by..... Chöying Drolma & Steve Tibbetts, Nawang Khechog,  
Yungcheng Lhamo, Aaron Mendez, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Techung**

*An Imakoko Media production in association with Argot Pictures and Surla Films.*

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FIRE UNDER THE SNOW was shot in Tibet, India, Italy, Nepal and the United States.  
It has been in production for 3 years.