

A FILM  
DIRECTED

by Aitore  
Zholdaskali

STARRING

Ayan Utepbergen, Dilnaz  
Kurmangali, Azat Zhumadil,  
Aida Kurmangaliyeva

PRODUCED

by Almas Zhali, Askhat Usmanov,  
Kuanysh Beisek, Anna Katchko

SCRIPTWRITERS:

Kazybek Orazbek, Aldiyar  
Zhaparkhanov

CINEMATOGRAPHY:

Bagdat Argynov

PRODUCTION  
COMPANY:

TARTARIA FILMS,  
Kazakhstan

SALES AGENT:

LOCO FILMS,  
France

COUNTRIES OF  
PRODUCTION:

KAZAKHSTAN

FORMAT:

Gritty Hard-boiled social  
Thriller

RUNNING TIME:

102'

NATIONAL  
RELEASE:

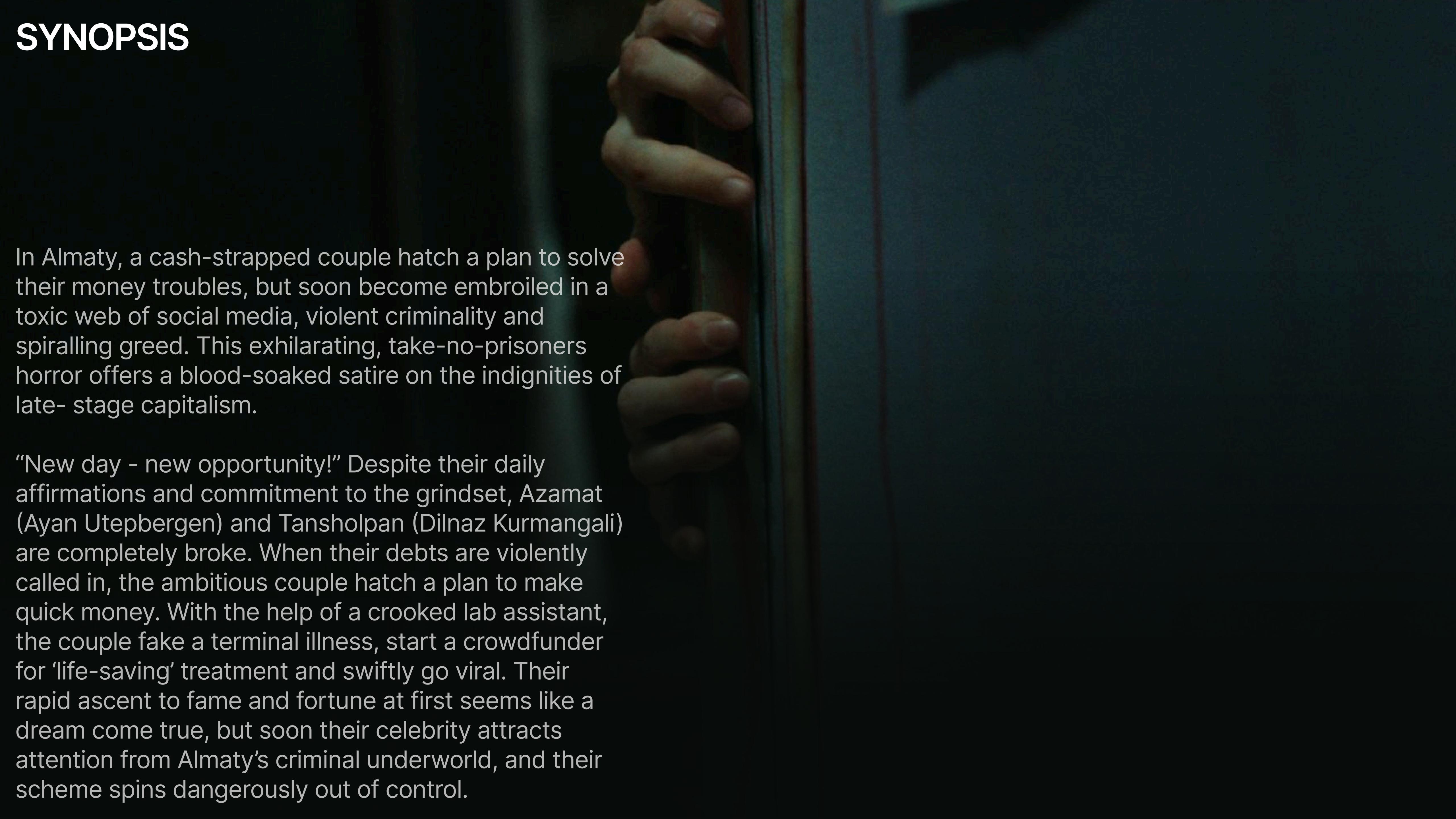
November 13th, 2025 in  
Kazakhstan. Local BOX-OFFICE Hit  
and Social Phenomenon

INTERNATIONAL  
PREMIERE :

February 1st, 2026 at ROTTERDAM  
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL,  
Bright Future Section



# SYNOPSIS

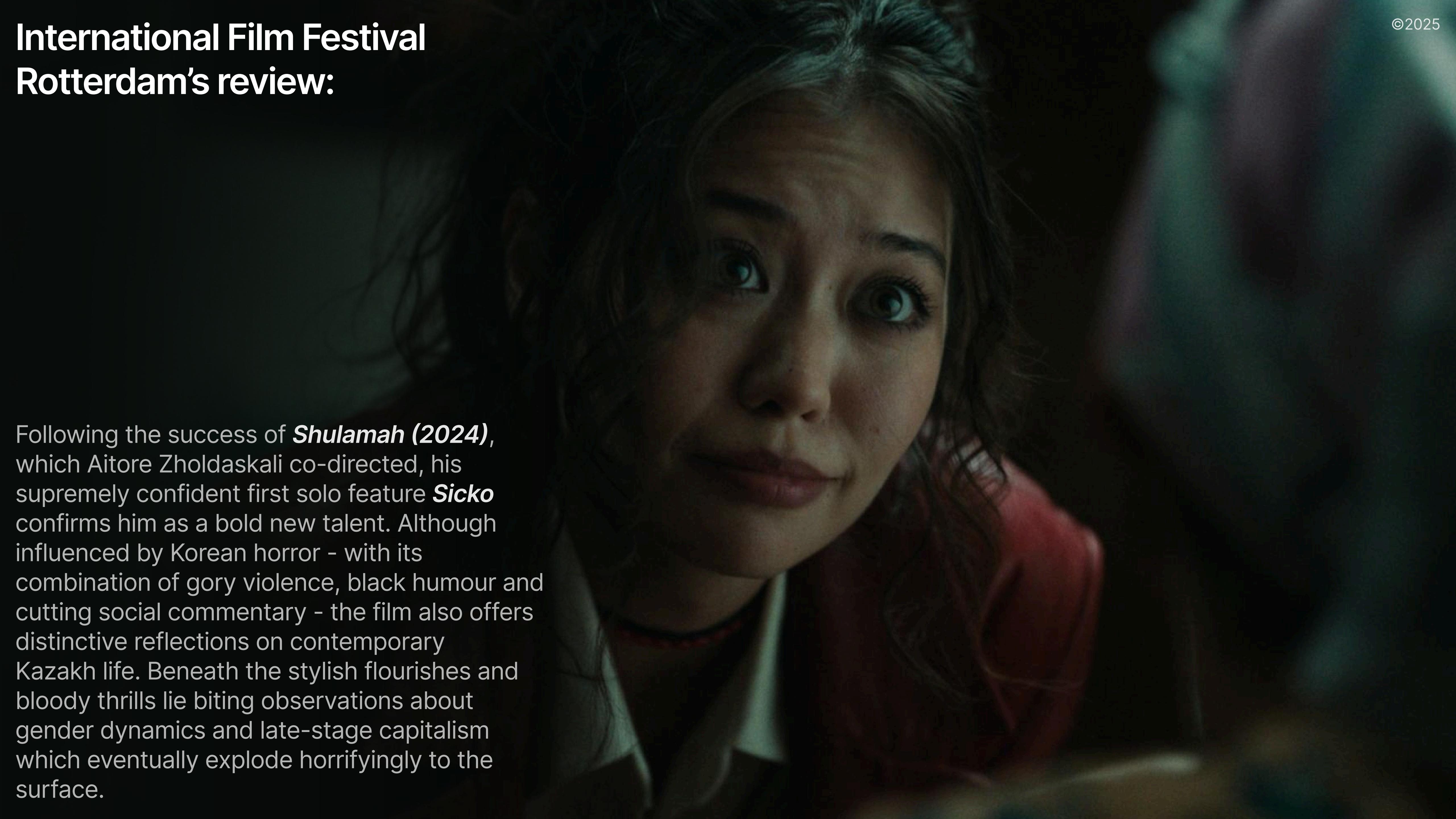


In Almaty, a cash-strapped couple hatch a plan to solve their money troubles, but soon become embroiled in a toxic web of social media, violent criminality and spiralling greed. This exhilarating, take-no-prisoners horror offers a blood-soaked satire on the indignities of late-stage capitalism.

“New day - new opportunity!” Despite their daily affirmations and commitment to the grindset, Azamat (Ayan Utepbergen) and Tansholpan (Dilnaz Kurmangali) are completely broke. When their debts are violently called in, the ambitious couple hatch a plan to make quick money. With the help of a crooked lab assistant, the couple fake a terminal illness, start a crowdfunder for ‘life-saving’ treatment and swiftly go viral. Their rapid ascent to fame and fortune at first seems like a dream come true, but soon their celebrity attracts attention from Almaty’s criminal underworld, and their scheme spins dangerously out of control.

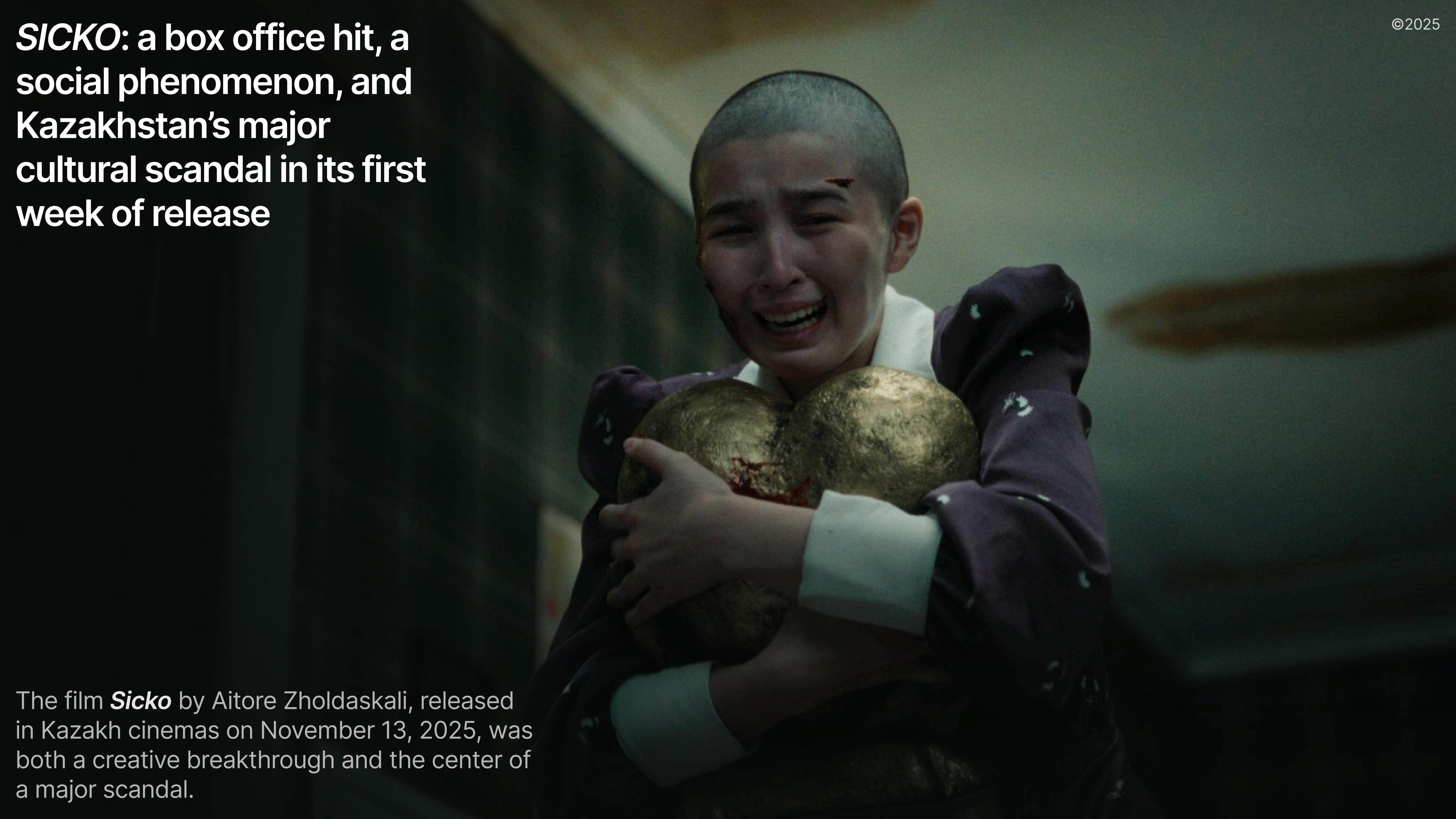
# International Film Festival

## Rotterdam's review:



Following the success of *Shulamah* (2024), which Aitore Zholdaskali co-directed, his supremely confident first solo feature *Sicko* confirms him as a bold new talent. Although influenced by Korean horror - with its combination of gory violence, black humour and cutting social commentary - the film also offers distinctive reflections on contemporary Kazakh life. Beneath the stylish flourishes and bloody thrills lie biting observations about gender dynamics and late-stage capitalism which eventually explode horrifyingly to the surface.

# **SICKO: a box office hit, a social phenomenon, and Kazakhstan's major cultural scandal in its first week of release**



The film ***Sicko*** by Aitore Zholdaskali, released in Kazakh cinemas on November 13, 2025, was both a creative breakthrough and the center of a major scandal.



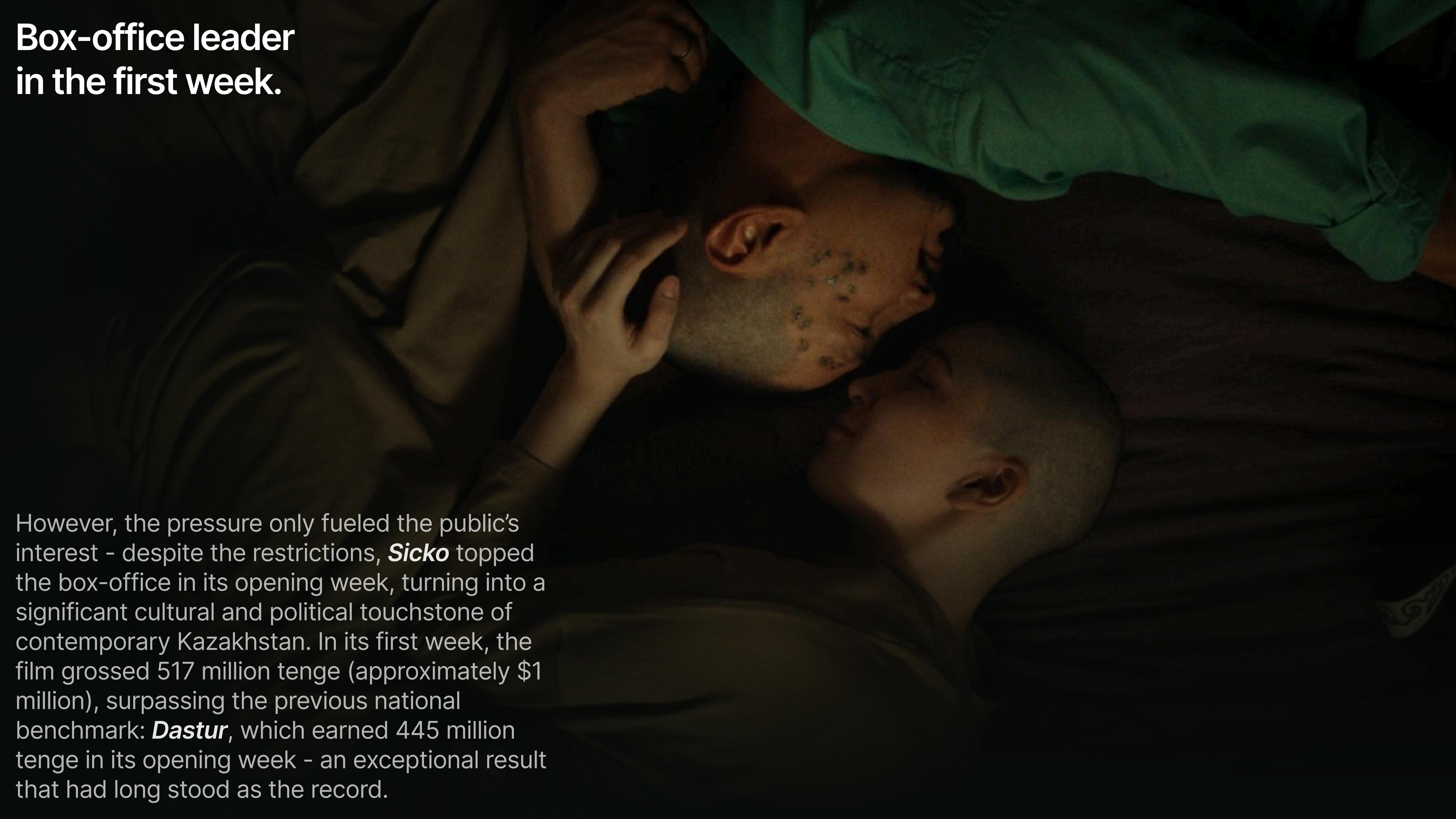
# The social drama faced unprecedented censorship.

Just two days before its nationwide release, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Culture delivered an extensive list of mandatory edits, threatening to revoke the film's distribution license unless the specified scenes were removed. Although the initial demands were framed as concerns over profanity and on-screen violence, the true motives of the censors soon became apparent.

While numerous violent scenes were ultimately left untouched, the authorities attempted to strip the film of its political context. Several key critical scenes were cut shortly before release, and the film's age rating was abruptly raised from 18+ to 21+ (a first in Kazakhstan's history). This decision restricted screenings to the late-night hours between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. In addition, cinemas reportedly received informal recommendations not to screen *Sicko* at all.



# Box-office leader in the first week.



However, the pressure only fueled the public's interest - despite the restrictions, *Sicko* topped the box-office in its opening week, turning into a significant cultural and political touchstone of contemporary Kazakhstan. In its first week, the film grossed 517 million tenge (approximately \$1 million), surpassing the previous national benchmark: *Dastur*, which earned 445 million tenge in its opening week - an exceptional result that had long stood as the record.

# An unprecedented social phenomenon.

Just days after its release, *Sicko* evolved into a full-scale social phenomenon. The film became the subject of countless analytical articles and generated thousands of **Threads** posts and viral **TikTok** videos, as viewers began applying the film's narrative to their own lives and professional experiences.

Breaking far beyond the confines of cinema, *Sicko* embedded itself in public discourse, sparking a wide-ranging national conversation about trust, manipulation, and the moral cost of exploiting others' suffering.



On **TikTok**, users emotionally analyzed scenes and characters, drawing deeply personal meanings from the film and creating their own videos on the topic. At the same time, business-oriented interpretations began to appear: entrepreneurs and experts translated the plot of ***Sicko*** into their own professional contexts - from marketing and sales to reputation management and building audience trust. The number of mentions and discussions on **Threads** (extremely popular social media in Kazakhstan) exceeded 10,000.

People wrote mini-essays recounting personal encounters with fraudulent charity schemes, reflecting on where genuine empathy ends and monetized compassion begins, and sharing stories of trust, debt, family responsibility, shame, and guilt. The Gorillaz track “Feel Good Inc.”, which plays during a key scene in the film became an emotional code for ***Sicko*** - a moment audiences actively discussed, reinterpreted, and incorporated into their own videos.

**On social media, *Sicko* functioned as a form of collective therapy: each viewer extended the story toward their own personal pain.**



# Director's Biography and Filmography

Aitore Zholdaskali started filming very young, creating short films, industrial films and music videos. His first web series ***Sheker (2020)*** became a huge success and has been watched by millions of people in the CIS, making him a celebrity.

The series was screened at Cannes and Busan, won the Short/Web Drama category at the Asia Contents Awards in South Korea, and received seven nominations at the La Indie Film Festival in the United States. Aitore was later involved in the successful Kazakh feature ***Shulamah (2024)*** as co-director. ***Sicko*** marks his debut as a solo feature film director.



# Director's Statement

I try to choose characters whose problems I understand - this allows me to look more deeply into their stories and destinies. In many ways, the young family at the center of *Sicko* represents countless families I see every day in Kazakhstan. The man is doing everything he can to earn money, to prove to himself and to those around him that he is a "real man" and that he is capable of anything. The woman is someone who was raised in a traditional Muslim family and taught that she must rely on a man in everything. These are the realities of Kazakhstan.

Many people are not prepared for dignified personal growth, which is why corruption in the country is so widespread, and why there are so many fraudsters -and so many victims. I have encountered such people hundreds of times since childhood. Everywhere, everyone is trying to grab their share, and this has even become something that is respected. If you manage to deceive someone, then you are considered "cool." I have seen this firsthand while working as a volunteer with veterans.

These are the layers of a sick society - the society of my city. I see how this sickness becomes a disease. Over time, you stop feeling guilt about it. The filth settles in your mind, then spreads, infecting your family, your children, your friends and half of society. This disease leads people toward ignorance, theft, and hatred. The most frightening thing is that I cannot offer any solution. I cannot give any cure for this disease. All I can do is make a film, trying to understand these people.

I like films that hurt you through the frame. I love the hyper-realism of Alexei German Sr., Fincher, and Iñárritu. This pain within the frame has become an important part of my own style. I would not say that any single author influences me more than others - I prefer to observe everything that happens around me. Since childhood, I have been quiet and liked watching events from the sidelines, probably because I was shy about being a direct participant. In the end, I would not call myself a cinephile or someone who loves watching and studying films. I love making films.

This process fascinates me. I prefer to think of myself as a conduit rather than a creator. I like this role more. Because almost 100% of my decisions have nothing to do with logic - they are about intuition, sensations, and certain signals in my mind and heart. And this film was made the same way: purely through feelings and sensations.

**Aitore Zholdaskali**

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