

Minamata, suppressed by MGM, to be released in North America on December 15

David Walsh
9 December 2021

On December 3, Iervolino & Lady Bacardi Entertainment (ILBE) officially announced that it had acquired North American distribution rights to *Minamata*, the drama about the industrial poisoning of Japanese fishing communities. The news was reported by *Deadline* two days earlier.

The film, directed by Andrew Levitas, features Johnny Depp as photographer W. Eugene Smith, who worked tirelessly in the 1970s to expose the Chisso Corporation's criminality. While *Minamata* has been released in many countries around the world, to considerable acclaim, MGM, which previously held the rights, sat on the film for months, in apparent response to a #MeToo smear campaign against Depp.

ILBE is partnering with Samuel Goldwyn Films to release *Minamata* in theaters beginning December 15, with a theatrical rollout across the US and Canada extending into 2022. One of the aims is to make the film eligible for Academy Award consideration. ILBE and Samuel Goldwyn were also responsible for the US release of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Ciro Guerra, 2019), the remarkable film about colonial brutality also featuring Depp.

Minamata, written by David K. Kessler, Stephen Deuters, Jason Forman and Levitas, received its world premiere as a Berlinale Special Gala as part of the 2020 Berlin International Film Festival. In a press release, ILBE's Andrea Iervolino said, "Anchored by standout performances and stunning direction and craft artistry, *Minamata* is the kind of purposeful storytelling that sinks in with audiences and a movie they will appreciate seeing."

Director-writer-producer Levitas told *Deadline*: "I am thrilled that North American audiences will finally be able to learn about what happened and continues to happen in *Minamata* and around the world. The

silencing of marginalized voices and those left behind ... by large corporate behemoths has to end, and with new like-minded partners this story will finally come to light in North America and hopefully offer some peace to the victims and their families who have been put through far too much."

Kevin Eugene Smith, the son of W. Eugene Smith, responded to the *Deadline* article on December 1: "Here's the news we've all been awaiting: *Minamata* will be released in the U.S. and Canada beginning 12/15 in select theaters. Then into 2022. Thanks to all who pressured MGM so tirelessly to relinquish distribution rights to Samuel Goldwyn Films."

The news of the film's distribution is very welcome, but it in no way diminishes the foul attempt by MGM and the Hollywood establishment generally to "bury" *Minamata*. At least now Levitas' film will escape the fate of Roman Polanski's *J'accuse (An Officer and a Spy)*, 2019), a drama about the notorious Dreyfus Affair, which has been entirely blocked from being shown to US audiences.

Director Woody Allen's films have been subjected to a virtual blacklist as well. One of the principal players in preventing Allen's films from being made or seen and generally blackening his name has been Amazon Studios, which is in the process of buying MGM. Amazon broke a contract with the veteran writer-director in 2019 and refused to distribute *A Rainy Day in New York* on the grounds that his critical comments about the #MeToo campaign had "sabotaged" attempts to promote his movie.

The harsh reality is that a layer of gender-obsessed zealots in the media and the entertainment world is striving to establish a virtual veto power over what audiences in North America may or may not see.

The protest campaign against MGM's suppression of

the film, which ultimately forced its hand, attracted widespread support. In an open letter to MGM executives in November, Kevin Smith implored the studio “to release the film this year while it is still timely and generating positive buzz in other countries around the globe. I also am hoping that MGM will submit the film and qualify it for the upcoming awards season because I think it would be a contender in multiple categories.”

Smith expressed the view that Depp’s “personal battles” with former wife Amber Heard should not “prevent the U.S. public from seeing a worthy and important film about the true story of the victims of mercury poisoning as a result of corporate malfeasance. At the very least, I would be grateful for an explanation from MGM as to the reasons why *Minamata* is the only completed film in your inventory not currently scheduled for release this year.”

The famed photographer’s son urged MGM “not to stand in the way of allowing public viewing and award consideration for this important and beautiful film. ... MGM’s ongoing refusal to release it or even explain why dishonors my dad W. Eugene Smith, his legacy, his family, Aileen M. Smith, the Minamata victims, and the dedicated cast and crew of the film who poured their hearts and souls into it.” MGM executives never replied to Smith’s letter.

The *World Socialist Web Site* played an active and central role in the campaign against MGM’s actions. In its initial review and seven subsequent interviews with renowned photographers, along with Kevin Smith himself, the WSWS placed the controversy in the context of growing global attacks on democratic rights and artistic freedom. In his open letter to MGM, Kevin Smith cited the comments of photographer Stephen Dupont, a winner of the W. Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography in 2007, posted by the WSWS.

Smith explained: “My own views were summarized best by another Smith Grant recipient, Stephen Dupont, who said recently in a published interview: ‘Regardless of what Depp is alleged to have done in his personal life—and there are just allegations about what happened during a marriage breakdown—he’s just an actor. The big picture here is the film, its story and the victims of the mercury poisoning. MGM shouldn’t be crossing that boundary. Don’t shoot the messenger is what I’d

say. ... MGM is not just punishing Depp but everyone else, the other actors, the director, the cinematographer, writers, all those involved.’”

In addition to Smith and Dupont, the WSWS spoke with or received statements from photographers Jack Picone, David Dare Parker, John Hulme, Jane Evelyn Atwood, Tim Page and Cristopher Rogel Blanquet. Each offered powerful comments about the photography and social commitment of W. Eugene Smith, as well as the deplorable conduct of MGM in regard to *Minamata*.

Page, for example, the Australian-based veteran war photographer, famed for exposing the realities of the Vietnam War, pointed out that Eugene Smith “was a brilliant photographer and someone who came back from the edge of disaster in the Second World War. He was seriously wounded and wrestling with all sorts of psychological trauma.”

Page noted that “when I hear about *Minamata* being banned, in the sense that MGM in America is not releasing it, it just reinforces my concerns about the cultural dumbing down that’s going on. Is MGM doing this to get more publicity or to ingratiate themselves with somebody? What is all this supposed to achieve? ... Mega-corporations don’t give a damn about individuals, period.”

Twitter impressions in response to the WSWS *Minamata* articles and related tweets totaled just under 100,000.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact