

Princess Pictures and Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland present a Sasha King film



*“My reason for blowing the lid on the CervicalCheck scandal was to ensure that my daughter inherits a healthcare system that won’t fail her as it did me.”*

## Vicky

### Production Notes

**Director:** Sasha King

**Producers:** Sasha King, Bill Snodgrass, and Vicky Phelan

**Main Contributor:** Vicky Phelan

**Executive Producer:** Martina Niland, Lesley McKimm

**Composer:** Bill Snodgrass

**Produced with the support of Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland**

**Volta Pictures (formerly Element Distribution) will release VICKY to Irish cinemas on October 7**

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#vickythefilm

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*IRISH PREMIERE VIRGIN MEDIA DUBLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2022*

*WINNER BEST IRISH DOCUMENTARY - DUBLIN FILM CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD*

*NOMINATED- THE ICCL HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD*

### **Short Synopsis**

In 2018 on the steps of the High Court in Dublin, Vicky Phelan gave a now infamous address where she exposed one of the worst women's health scandals in Irish History, the CervicalCheck debacle. VICKY is a profound and intimate journey into not only her fight to expose the truth of what happened for all women but also her own personal fight to stay alive.

### **Long Synopsis**

An inspiring story of courage, hope and resilience, VICKY takes audiences behind the headlines of the CervicalCheck debacle and Vicky Phelan's journey to expose one of the greatest health scandals in Ireland's history. Following discovery that her smear test results were incorrect, a fact that had been deliberately withheld from her, Vicky realised there had to be other women similarly affected as her. She

took on the system, all the way to the High Court settling her case, with no admission of liability on the part of the laboratory or health services. However she resolutely refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement, and undeterred despite her own devastating diagnosis, she vowed to fight for justice on behalf of all those affected. It was later discovered that hundreds of women were misdiagnosed and could have benefitted from earlier treatment. Over twenty women have since died. A true *'latter day warrior Queen'*, Vicky's selfless courage in the service of others has changed the course of healthcare for Irish women and exemplifies what one person can achieve when they use their voice for the greater good.

VICKY is a Princess Pictures production produced by Sasha King, Bill Snodgrass, and Vicky Phelan with the support of Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland. Executive producers are Martina Niland, and Lesley McKimm for Screen Ireland.

### **Background notes:**

In 2011, a cervical smear test Vicky Phelan had undergone with Ireland's national state run organisation CervicalCheck was misreported to her as normal. CPL in Austin, Texas, the laboratory to whom this work was contracted, failed to identify that the slide showed squamous cell carcinoma, cancerous cells.

In January 2018, Vicky was told she had a 10cm inoperable tumour mass. She was given the devastating news of a terminal diagnosis and that she had 6-12 months to live. Twelve months if she chose palliative chemotherapy, six months if she did not. At the age of 43, she was advised to go home and get her affairs in order.

When reviewing her medical file, Vicky came across a two-page audit report from CervicalCheck in 2016 in relation to her misdiagnosed smear. She noticed page one of this audit was not included in her file. At that moment, she knew information about her diagnosis was missing. Was there a chance that she could have been told about this mistake in 2016? She needed to get to the truth.

*"Cervical cancer is slow-growing and knowing in time gives you a chance to fight it,  
I was not given that opportunity".*



Despite being terminally ill, Vicky, and her husband Jim prepared for trial against the Irish Health Service, and the American Laboratory CPL who misread her smear.

Still the Irish public knew nothing of her case. The dual opposition presented Vicky with a non-disclosure agreement, meaning the details of her case would be kept a secret.

Vicky refused to sign, declaring on the steps of the court...

*“It is only by telling my story that change can come about”.*

Vicky’s highly emotional statement and what she revealed on that day sent shock waves through the Irish nation. She became the whistle blower for a dire national cervical cancer misdiagnosis exposé.

Despite her terminal diagnosis, Vicky made it her mission to fight for the truth and investigate how something like this could happen to her and the other women affected.

The investigation went on to reveal that over 221 women were affected by the CervicalCheck scandal and that 17 women had already died by the time Vicky broke the story.

Vicky’s strength, determination and blatant perseverance has earned her the title of ‘the woman that has changed Ireland’. In recognition of her unwavering commitment to women’s health, she has received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Limerick, an Honorary Fellowship from Waterford Institute of Technology, the Freedom of Limerick Award and the admiration of influential peers including former Irish president Mary Robinson. In 2018 Vicky was named in BBC’s Top 100 Women, an international list of

women of the year chosen in recognition of their outstanding contribution to society.

**Directors Statement – Sasha King**

I, like many, was floored, upon hearing the enormity of what Vicky was telling us as a nation on the 6 o'clock news, outside the High Court on that April day in 2018. I was immediately drawn to Vicky. Her vulnerability and emotion on that day was tangible but her lioness strength was her super power. I felt an overwhelming drive to connect with her and to make it my mission to share her story to as many people as possible.

Life for Vicky turned on its axis the day she stood outside of the High Court. She quickly became a public figure and activist, the whistle blower to a monumental women's health scandal. When Vicky speaks, we all listen to what she has to say.

But no one has seen the private side of Vicky. What happened to this young mother in these extraordinary circumstances when she closed the front door of her home. What was it like for Vicky out of the spotlight with two young children, Amelia and Darragh, to take care of amidst the public knowledge that their Mam is dying.

*"I spend the down time with the kids and consciously try not to go near my phone as I am fully aware that, with a terminal diagnosis, this could be my last summer and I am living each day to the full and enjoying my kids with the energy I have"*

I approached Vicky to make this film about her and she loved my ideas and approach. She gave me exclusive rights and access to her, her husband Jim, their two children and her closest circle of friends and family for the purpose of documenting her story in this heightened period of time of her 6-12 month terminal diagnosis. We became very close talking most days. I planned and filmed not knowing what would happen next to her, or what would be uncovered next. I also wanted her to recount the series of events that lead to the court case and the impact that had on her and her family. I wanted to capture Vicky behind the scenes, in real time, the day-to-day life, fighting to stay alive and fighting for all the other women affected. The cervical cancer story unravelled and evolved in front of us. 15 women effected became 40, then 120, and then the staggering reality of 221+ women being effected was revealed, with 17 of these women already dead.

During this time, we documented Vicky's fight to access the experimental drug Pembrolizumab, and then her fight to make this drug available to all women with cervical cancer. Her meetings with government ministers and An Taoiseach to demand real change and accountability for women's health. She received heart-breaking news of her own cancer progression during this time, as do some of her fellow women in the 221+ group as the tragedy of attending some of their funerals became a sad reality.

Then out of the public eye, I captured Vicky taking time alone on her favourite beach to reflect on all. It was at this point she revealed to me that this is where she wishes her ashes be buried. We documented her at home with her children, at hugely poignant times, like Darragh telling her his wish list from Santa is for his mam to get better and a family walk on the beach on New Year's Day 2019, exactly 12 months from her 12-month terminal prognosis. I also captured Vicky signing her permission for her daughter to receive the HPV vaccine in her kitchen, the very cancer she is dying from. It is these moments where we see the vulnerable woman, the mum, who just wants to be here for her family.

This was my passion project. I worked tirelessly for 4 years to get this film made to the highest production standard while sensitively carving out Vicky's story. I felt a great responsibility to make this film. I believe we have captured her spirit and the essence of what makes Vicky a truly extraordinary woman. She is fighting for all of us. This is a message for Mnà nahÉireann.



### **Capturing the Visual Style**

I used various filming styles as the nature of the film required that it was important to have the beautiful cinematic wide ethereal shots of Vicky on her favourite beach to depict the bigger picture greatness of the situation she finds herself in, and her reflecting on her life and much documented death and what has happened to her. The film opens and closes with variations of these images. They also serve as junctions for her reflection throughout the film.

I also filmed her in Doonbeg in her holiday home where she is very comfortable and she shares her inner thoughts on the series of events that brought her to the High Court. She recounts intimately about the day she was told about her terminal prognosis.

We used two 4k cameras for all of the interviews including her doctors in hospitals and the politicians in the Dail in Dublin and her solicitor in Cashel in Tipperary.

We also used the 4k cameras handheld when we were required to film on-the-go and capture quickly. With her hospital visits that we could not get access to, and some reactions in real time to news, I asked Vicky to film herself on her phone camera for the purpose of including in the film, like when she hears of Emma Mhic Mathuna's passing and she pulls her car over to process the news for me ...on camera. There is also gimble 4k footage of her visiting her parents in Mooncoin, Kilkenny and of her at home in Annacotty, Limerick. These serve as another layer of intimate footage, up close and personal.

### **A Tribute Through Music**

The music was a really important part of the film and process. From very early on I had discussed with Bill Snodgrass, the composer, an idea I had for the title track. I wanted an Ode to Vicky, a tribute, an anthem of sorts and a call to Mnà na hÈireann to listen and take notice to one of their own who was paying the ultimate sacrifice with her life and yet still selflessly fighting so no one else would have to.

I wanted a drumbeat like a march and a raw male voice, to show support from men as well as women to her. Bill wrote the song "This Fight" and his sons Tadgh and Tristan sang it. Tadgh is a trained opera and classical singer so he carried the vocal beautifully and Tristan gave harmonies. It is a stunning tribute to her and Vicky loves it.

I knew Vicky was very fond of The Stunning and Bressie. I had heard that she had asked both to perform at her funeral and Bressie had written a song about her.

Bressie sent me the song he wrote "Play God" and I knew immediately it was powerful and had to be the closing song of the film.

The Stunning had performed a private show for Vicky and her friends in 2018 and I was lucky enough to be able to capture it and include it in the film. We see Vicky and her friends dancing and singing to the song "Brewing up a storm", a very appropriate song and anthem to include in the film.

Aine Morgan is a friend and activist with Vicky. She has terminal cancer and has campaigned for women to have access to Pembrolizumab. She is an amazing, accredited singer and she wrote the song "I'm still here" about Vicky, which features in the film.

All four tracks feature in the film and composer Bill Snodgrass also wrote a beautiful soundtrack with specific motifs at poignant junctions that marries the storyline beautifully.

**Music:**

“This fight”

Written by Bill Snodgrass

Performed by Tadgh Snodgrass and Tristan Snodgrass

“Brewing up a storm”

Written and performed by The Stunning

“I’m Still Here”

Written and performed by Aine Morgan

“Play God”

Written by Niall Breslin, performed by The Blizzards

**Contributors include the following:**

Vicky, Jim, Amelia and Darragh Phelan

John and Gaby Kelly – Vicky’s parents

Anne Fitzgerald – Vicky’s Aunt

Lyndsey Kelly – Vicky’s sister

Susan McFeely – Vicky’s childhood friend

Maria Cronin – Vicky’s childhood friend

Lorraine and Gary Walsh – 221+ Stephen and Irene Teap – 221+

Peter Kearns and Emma Keane – Introduced Vicky to Catherine Keane -Emma’s Mum

Helen Murphy – Vicky’s Boss at WITE

Geraldine Mernagh – Vicky’s work associates WIT Eilish Dunworth – Vicky’s work associates WIT Cathy Balfe – 221+

Mary McAuliffe – 221+ Patricia McCarthy – 221+ Louise Swift – 221+

Aine Morgan – Activist for access to Pembrolizumab

221+ women in the film - who have passed away: Emma Mhic Mathúna, Julie O’Reilly, Ruth Morrissey.

Pembrolizumab activist in the film who has passed away: Tracey Brennan

Cian O’Carroll – Vicky’s solicitor Siobhan Ryan – Vicky’s solicitor

Dr Mary Robinson – President of Ireland

Professor Gabriel Scally – Appointed by government to report on Cervicalcheck situation. Dr David Fennelly – Vicky’s oncologist

Dr Sanjiv Manek – Vicky’s expert witness at trial Caoimhghin Ó Caoláin – Dail speaker in 2008 Mary Lou



McDonald – Leader of Sinn Fein Simon Harris – Minister for Health 2018

Alan Kelly – Labour TD 2018

Norah Casey – Tatler Women of the Year Shauna O’Halloran – Tatler Women of the Year

### **About Princess Pictures**

Princess Pictures Ltd – Directors Sasha King and Bill Snodgrass.

Award winning production company Princess Pictures has been producing films since 2006. Its recent feature film AKRON, directed by Sasha King, won awards at eleven festivals in North America where it is distributed by Wolfe Distribution and Hulu.

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Executive Producers Martina Niland, Lesley McKimm, Composer Bill Snodgrass

Produced by Sasha King, Bill Snodgrass, and Vicky Phelan

Featuring music from The Blizzards, The Stunning, Aine Morgan, Tadgh Snodgrass, Tristan Snodgrass

Directed by Sasha King

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[www.vickythefilm.com](http://www.vickythefilm.com)

### **About Volta Pictures**

VOLTA PICTURES (FORMERLY ELEMENT DISTRIBUTION) is one of Ireland’s leading independent film distribution companies founded in 2007 by Ed Guiney and Andrew Lowe.

Volta Pictures offers the best in Irish, Independent and Event Cinema titles. Notable releases include Nick Rowland’s BAFTA-nominated debut CALM WITH HORSES, Lenny Abrahamson’s Golden Globe and Academy Award® winning ROOM, Yorgos Lanthimos’ multi-award-winning THE LOBSTER and THE KILLING OF A SACRED DEER, Paddy Breathnach’s ROSIE, Dave Tynan’s DUBLIN OLDSCHOOL and Shelly Love’s A BUMP ALONG THE WAY. In 2011, we released John Michael McDonagh’s THE GUARD, which became one of the highest-grossing independent Irish films of all time. Recent releases include Phyllida Lloyd’s Sundance sensation HERSELF and Michael McCormack’s award-winning documentary BREAKING OUT. In addition, Volta Pictures work with leading distributors eOne and The Royal Opera House to bring their world-class releases and event cinema content to Irish audiences. Other special collaborations include partnering with Druid to bring Tom Murphy’s version of THE CHERRY ORCHARD to cinema audiences, a first for Irish theatre.