



Filmmaker
Alimani, *left*,
with his wife and
producer Bejko

Blue Collar by Day, Red Carpet by Night

Immigrants Tefta Bejko and Bujar Alimani work service jobs to support their family—and fund their award-winning films

BUJAR ALIMANI: We graduated from university in 1992. Democracy had started in Albania, but it's a poor country, scarred by repression.

Tefta Bejko: Leaving was our best hope for a life free from state interference. But only the old regime's communist "fathers" could get visas.

Bujar: I decided to walk to Albania's border with Greece and cross it.

Tefta: For eight days, Bujar climbed mountains and crossed rivers. Once he was settled in Greece, I joined him. Our daughter, Savina, was born there a few years later.

Bujar: We started making short films, then features. I write and direct; Tefta handles the production. Our work has won many awards. Albania chose my first feature, *Amnistia*, as its entry for the 2012 Oscars.

Tefta: Then the Museum of Modern Art in New York City invited Bujar for the film's North American premiere.

Bujar: Tefta and Savina stayed behind in Greece. But I discovered I could qualify for a green card, and they were able to join me in the Bronx. Since then, two of my other films—*Krom* for 2017 and *Delegacioni* for 2020—were Albania's official Oscar submissions.

Tefta: I work as a cashier at a local supermarket. Bujar often works construction eight hours a day. And at night, we work on our films.

Bujar: When at a job site, if I were to say that three of my films have been put up for Academy Awards, it would probably sound like a joke.

Tefta: I sometimes mention to my coworkers that I'm a film producer, and they laugh. They don't believe it.

Bujar: We don't get paid much for our film work. Nearly every dollar we earn or raise goes to pay our actors, crew and expenses.

Tefta: We've made a lot of emotional films, but I never wept on a set until last July. That's when we filmed a gathering on Long Island for 12 women who grew up at an internment camp during Albania's communist era. If not for Bujar, who would document the abuse of power that left lasting scars?

Bujar: I must document these memories. I am an artist, and I must complete my mission. My mission is to tell not just the story, but the truth. —As told to Barbara Finkelstein

Writer-director Bujar Alimani, 52, has debuted movies at the Warsaw, Berlin and many other major international film festivals. Tefta Bejko, 51, produces many of Alimani's movies.