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Les Arcs International Competition: *Animal*

By Emilie Mahé

In competition with eight other European feature films at this, 15th edition of Les Arcs festival, Greek director **Sofia Exarchou**'s second film *Animal* takes us behind the scenes of an island vacation resort. Far from idealized images of turquoise waters and white sands, we follow a rag-tag international group of “animateurs”. Among them is Kalia, played by **Dimitra Vlagopoulou** (Exarchou's debut *Park*) who has just received the Award for Best Interpretation at Les Arcs, after winning the Best Actress Award at the Locarno Film Festival, where the film world-premiered, as well as at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, where the film also triumphed, scooping the Golden Alexander in International Competition.



Throughout the summer, this troupe, led by Kalia, dresses up in glitter and costumes to entertain tourists with dance choreographies, aquagym sessions and bingo games. The group also includes Eva (first-timer **Flomaria Papadaki**), a shy-looking young recruit. Exarchou swings between the two characters' points of view; Kalia's weariness and fatigue of being trapped in a repetitive world, and the innocent gaze of Eva's eyes discovering an unfamiliar environment, using them to reveal the inner workings of the staff community and their pursuit of creating artificial paradises.

The film opens with scenes of bodies in motion, interwoven with images of fish wriggling in an aquarium, an eloquent metaphor for Kalia's life going around in a circle. She is always drawn to the sea, the element that allows her to escape. The last show she

stages, the 'fish dance', reflects this turmoil through a choreography of camera movement, dance and lingering glances, underlined by dub and techno artist **Wolfgang Frisch**'s electronic score.

Monika Lenczewska's camera is often trained on Kalia who becomes increasingly damaged as the film progresses, and her inner pain is reflected in her body: just as she staples her knee to fix a wound, she takes medication to repair her ailing self. Her body, and bodies in general, are captured in at times raw, even brutal ways, within this toxic environment littered with drugs, alcohol, sexualization and a precarious lifestyle masked by sparkles and false smiles.

Through hand-held close-ups, the director places the viewer as a third party within the group, reinforcing the connection with characters and creating a realistic environment with a desaturated colour palette of brown, beige and blue-grey tones. These hues reflect Kalia's state of mind, underlining her bitterness and emotional complexity, and the overall aesthetics create a gloomy atmosphere in a supposed place of celebration and joy. It's a subtle visual representation of the contrast between the festive exterior and the darker, more introspective interior of the central character.

Exarchou immerses us in the life of vacation resort workers, yet the film could benefit from a deeper exploration of the social conditions in Greece rather than focusing solely on the psychological angle. Its occasionally stretched-out and repetitive feel might be a result of the lack of thematic diversity. Topics such as mass tourism, seasonal economic migration and social circumstances are touched upon, but for the audience to empathize with the characters' struggle, a more comprehensive and engaging vision of the environment could have made the film more compelling, while still maintaining its focus on the psychological aspect and emotional experience of the flawed heroine.

Les Arcs Industry Village Case Study: *Explanation for Everything*

By Viktor Tóth

Winner at the Venice Film Festival in the Horizons section, the Hungarian-Slovak co-production *Explanation for Everything* is now screening in the Official Competition at Les Arcs Film Festival. The movie directed by **Gábor Reisz** (*For Some Inexplicable Reason*) is an intimate game of perspectives, built around a scandal that shakes the divided Hungarian society – a kind of film that has not been made in the country for several years. The backstory of how such a potentially divisive film was made is perhaps even more exciting, as it was told by producer **Júlia Berkes** and sales agent **Gabor Greiner** of Germany's Films Boutique, at a case study presentation in Les Arcs Film Festival's Industry Village programme of conferences.

“After pitching two films with political content [to the National Film Institute of Hungary], we sent in something that wasn't political at all just to test the system if it goes through, but it didn't,” Berkes recalled. “It was the end of November 2021 when we decided that four years have passed since our last film and that it was time to make more movies, but clearly they didn't want us to.”

The climate in the Hungarian film industry partly stems from the protests that took place in 2020 when the government replaced the directorship of the National Film School in Budapest and made it impossible for a wider range of filmmakers to be accepted. This is the same film school that Berkes and Reisz attended, and where their professional relationship started, and it was this very protest that prompted the director to write the screenplay for a more socially engaged work than his earlier comedies which were warmly received by Hungarian audiences. Yet, for their new feature, the initial budget was just around €50,000.

Creative solutions

The micro-budget prompted the crew to find some creative solutions. While *Explanation for Everything* mostly features recurring interiors and medium or close-up shots, there are a few scenes which normally would be made with a dolly or a crane. Berkes shared some behind-the-scenes photos featuring a bike that was used in lieu of a camera car, a small boat for the scene set at Lake Balaton, and even the wheelchair of the grandmother of a crew member to replace a dolly. “The drone for the final shot was the fanciest thing we had,” joked Berkes.

The crew was also very small, consisting of only 17 people in total. As she explained, “We needed a DoP who’s used to documentary film shooting [...] and a good sound guy. Other than that, everybody else was a first-time filmmaker”.

Eventually, the entire budget of the film, including the funds from the Slovak company MPhilms that joined during post-production, was roughly €137,000. This is low even for the Hungarian film industry, where consistent state funds are available but mostly allocated to films with more “patriotic” leanings.

If the low-budget production was not enough of a challenge, the first cut of the film, three hours and twenty minutes long, proved to be extremely hard to reduce. “At the First Cut Lab in Trieste, they said it was the best first cut they have ever seen,” Greiner said. Berkes recalled the cutting process which was painful to Reisz. “At 150 minutes, I still wanted to cut some more, but he said no.”



Marketing and distribution

On top of it all, the distribution process of the film makes *Explanation for Everything* a true rags-to-riches story. On paper, a 150-minute film (presented in its 240-minute cut to most festival programmers) that is built around social-political divisions in a small Eastern European country – even if Hungarian cinema is not exactly obscure – is not something that can be easily marketed.

“We tried at first to present it as a love story,” said Greiner. *Explanation for Everything* has a complex enough structure that allows it to be positioned in various ways: a classic coming-of-age story, a teenage romance, a socio-political drama, a family tragedy, even a satire, given that several scenes are comical to Hungarian speakers. Eventually, the social scandal aspect of the story is what resonated most in the sales campaign, and also it was highlighted during the Venice Film Festival’s selection press conference.

“We were not sure about this choice [...], we worried that it would get lost. We pushed for an early screening date in hope that word of mouth would spread about the movie,” Greiner explained. Indeed, for those who attended the Venice Film Festival, the general perception was very favourable for the film, standing out even among films showing in the main competition around the same few days. After winning the Best Film Award in Horizons, the appeal of *Explanation for Everything* skyrocketed: distribution was secured in more than twenty countries and it was selected by countless festivals.

This enthusiastic international reaction has likely influenced the reception in Hungary: before the Venice win, the biggest cinema chain in Hungary was undecided about showing the film, the National Film Institute refused to screen it, and generally the chances of reaching a wide audience were grim. This, according to Berkes, was motivated both by the perceived political nature of the film and its length – the latter especially in the case of the cinema chain. Eventually, however, thanks to the Venice award, the overwhelmingly positive reviews by virtually every liberal outlet, and even some of the government-aligned ones, the film received a wide theatrical distribution. Berkes also mentioned a specific case in which a far-right wing outlet published a very positive review and removed it a few hours later.

The production of *Explanation of Everything* is a story of success: with a micro-budget, a barebone crew, no government endorsement and a topic and length that seemed unmarketable, the film has been almost everywhere across the globe, and is still set to continue its journey in the next year.

Les Arcs Talent Village: Filmmakers and Composers

By Aurelia Aasa

As the short film industry is thriving, film festivals are putting more and more emphasis on how to accompany short film makers on their journey towards first features. Les Arcs' Talent Village, which just wrapped its tenth edition, is one of such initiatives. Curated by the Industry Village team, eight participants showcased their upcoming projects, exploring themes ranging from post-apocalyptic scenarios to coming-of-age narratives. The participating directors were: **Rinaldas Tomaševičius** (Lithuania), **Emma Branderhorst** (Netherlands), **Marlene Emilie Lyngstad** (Norway), **Alma Buddecke** (Germany), **Lisa**

Sallustio (Belgium), **Joséphine Darcy Hopkins** (France), **Anna Wowra** (Poland), and **Isabella Margara** (Greece).

For this writer, the most intriguing part of the three-day event was the workshop focusing on the collaboration between filmmakers and composers. In the film industry, directors (or producers) usually choose composers for their projects. In the Talent Village, the tables are turned, with composers selecting the directors. So, in addition to the presented feature film projects, four composers (each of whom worked on two projects), performed their scores. Composers selected for this year edition were **Niki Demiller** (France), **Jac van Exter** (Netherlands), **Juliette Sedes** (France) and **Ovidiu Zimcea** (Romania).



One of the most memorable projects comes from Lithuania. Rinaldas Tomaševičius graduated from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2022. A little over a decade ago, he faced homelessness. The director is open about his 20-year struggle with heroin addiction and often draws inspiration from his past. His short *Last Time* (Clermont-Ferrand 2022) follows a pregnant couple trying to find money for the addiction treatment.

In his feature *Dead Among the Living – Alive Among the Dead* (produced by **Lineta Lasiauskaite** of Vilnius-based Plopsas), Tomaševičius centres the narrative around Alanas who falls into heroin addiction after joining a street gang in order to escape his destructive family. On-set photos showcased at the festival depicted industrial landscapes and gigantic Soviet bloc houses, hinting at a similar setting as we have seen in his shorts. Accompanied by a captivating soundtrack by Juliette Sedes which blends Lithuanian folk songs with techno, the presentation marked a promising beginning for a bold autobiographical exploration of substance abuse.

“As a musician you always want to make a banger, but you have to tune yourself to the level of the film,” explains Zimcea. A melancholic tune accompanies the project by Emma Branderhorst, the director of several festival darlings (*Spotless*, *Ma mère et moi*), whose feature debut *This Will Not End Well* tracks the ending of a friendship. “I wanted to capture the feeling of a relationship that’s slowly drifting apart,” said the director.

Zimcea also worked with Marlene Emilie Lyngstad on *Cute*, a feature that follows the life cycle of a mass-produced stuffed animal, and which ended up winning the Talent Village Award. Lyngstad, whose graduation short *Norwegian Offspring* was awarded this year at Cannes' La Cinéf (formerly Cinéfondation), points out the contrast between 'tenderness and grotesqueness' that her team wants to explore further in the film. *Cute* is being produced by **Carl Adelhilde** of the Danish branch of Nordisk Film.

Paris-based Alma Buddecke recently wrote and directed for the Disney+ series '*Pauline*' that is premiering next year. Inspired by Somen Banerjee, the founder of Chippendales, Buddecke's feature with the working title *Hunger*, revolves around the life of Howie, a struggling carwash employee. Composer Jac van Exter chose synth sounds and 70s tunes to enhance the story.

Lisa Sallustio's debut *Cantiques* follows a glaciologist who starts a mysterious course of events after being sent to analyse a melting frozen lake, while dreams and nightmares collide in Joséphine Darcy Hopkins' fantasy-horror *Docile* (producer **Vincent Brançon**, TBC Productions) which tells the story of two sisters who discover an underground hairless rat colony. In collaboration with the composer Niki Demiller, classical music with a hint of grotesque was chosen to accompany the narrative of the project which received a special mention.

Another sister story comes from Anna Wowra, whose debut *In Good Faith* (produced by **Tomáš Pertold** of the Czech company Perfilm) speaks about unwanted pregnancy in a small, conservative Polish town, the same setting as in her short film *Stuck Together*.

Isabella Margara, a medical doctor turned filmmaker, presented the environmental post-apocalyptic western *Black Water*. The director intends to explore the question of how to live a life when life has become unbearable. Demiller crafted a soundtrack with traditional Balkan music, enhancing the film's melancholic atmosphere. While the exact direction of the work in progress is still unclear, Margara's previous work, the gloomy fairy-tale-like short *Nothing Holier than a Dolphin*, winner of the international Audience Award at this year's Clermont-Ferrand, suggests a surreal addition to the post-apocalyptic genre.

Several of the selected eight projects addressed similar topics, whether the ideas were based on personal stories or fantasy scenarios. And while the stage and potential of the projects varied, several of presented projects have promising distribution prospects. There is certainly room to improve diversity, particularly by including animation and documentary directors in the line-up. Nevertheless, Les Arcs' Talent Village has had another fruitful year, affirming the talent and unique perspectives that thrive in the short film industry.

Les Arcs Official Competition: *The Teachers' Lounge*

By Aurelia Aasa

Schoolteachers' working conditions – low salaries, heavy workload and high levels of stress– have been the topic of conversation globally for some time. According to Germany's Oscar contender, **Ilker Çatak**'s *The Teacher's Lounge*, competing this week at

the 15th Les Arcs Film Festival, these problems also seem to loom in the German educational system.

Carla Nowak, played brilliantly by **Leonie Benesch** (known as the sister of Prince Philip, Princess Cecilie of Greece and Denmark in Netflix's *The Crown*), is a young sports and math teacher who seems like the perfect role model for seventh-graders. Devoted, caring, and kind, her idealistic nature takes a hit when a student is falsely accused of theft. Determined to find the real culprit, Carla sets up a secret video camera. However, the teacher's well-intentioned actions unleash a storm, turning her into an unexpected target. Soon, everyone's favourite teacher becomes a villain who finds herself vilified in the school's newspaper, parents' WhatsApp group and even the otherwise uneventful teachers' lounge.



This particular location, or the school environment for that matter, may not initially strike one as the most captivating film setting. After all, haven't we explored it all, from classic American high school comedies (e.g. *Mean Girls*) to **Radu Jude's** Berlinale Golden Bear winner *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*? Çatak's feature navigates familiar terrain, viewing the educational setting as a microcosm of society in the post-truth era, where the one who screams the loudest holds the upper hand. If there's one thing that the director skilfully captures, it's that people always need someone to blame.

The Teachers' Lounge offers several memorable scenes, one of the most cathartic being the moment when Ms. Novak stands in front of the class before the lesson and declares, "Get up." Urging the children, she insists, "I want all of us to scream as loud as we can." Instead of the typical, light-hearted clapping ritual that they usually start the class with, a

collective scream follows. A series of emotional breakdowns set against the schoolhouse's greyish colour palette (by set designer **Zazie Knepper**) create a powerful contrast, stressing the solitude of school's unforgiving environment. This is underlined by the costume design (courtesy of **Christian Röhrs**, who was also behind another German festival hit, **Thomas Stuber's** *In the Aisles*): Carla's favourite clothing pieces are a dark blue polo neck, chestnut-coloured corduroy pants and woollen vests, emphasizing the teacher's uncomplicated and kind nature.

The Teacher's Lounge delves into themes of power, truth, and, most importantly, empathy. If it lacks anything, it's humour and (self-) irony that would potentially make the overwhelming situations more bearable. Occasionally, one finds oneself yearning for more kindness, and while there are a few instances of warmth – hugs or a few kind words – the film's created world can at times feel hopeless. Nonetheless, it is a thrilling social drama which particularly benefits from expert editing by **Gesa Jäger**, taking the viewer on a thought-provoking journey within the school walls. It stands as yet another compelling example of modern German cinema.