



Karlovy Vary
International Film Festival
Crystal Globe Competition

THE
a film by sonja tarokić
**STAFF
ROOM**

Croatia, 2021, 126 min, Croatian



kinorama



SYNOPSIS

Anamarija starts a new job as a counsellor in a school, which is a place full of petty conflicts and cliques. Initially she tries to stay out of the power games played by the headmistress, teachers and parents and just do her job with the children. But as she gets to know the system better Anamarija understands that in order to survive she has to sacrifice her integrity and play her own game in the staffroom.



A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown in profile, looking towards the left. She is wearing a dark jacket. In the background, a man with a beard and a patterned shirt is operating a professional video camera. The scene is set on a film set, with various pieces of equipment and a blurred background.

INTERVIEW
Sonja Tarokić

Before *The Staffroom* you made a number of well-received shorts. How does the experience of working on a short compare to working on a feature length film?

My short films dealt mostly with family and friends relationships, but it was equally important for me to show a particular local atmosphere, blending the environment with the emotions of my protagonists. That was something I wanted to have in my first feature as well, together with the lively chattiness that has always fascinated me in writing dialogues. On the other hand, I also wanted a quick-paced movie with many characters and elaborate scenes, and all those tasks that I had set to myself in my debut project made the exhausting process of working on a feature film even more difficult. Sometimes I think that almost nothing can prepare one for that experience, because short and feature length films are like two completely different worlds in many aspects. Especially on an emotional level, for someone like me, being my biggest critic. However, the greatest help were those people with whom I had already worked before. Together we “threw ourselves into the fire” and shared that crazy chaos. This project has further strengthened my belief in the importance of team work – from writing and development workshops, to the strong support and faith primarily of the producer, and then of the whole cast and crew.

Working within the education system is rarely thought of as a glamorous career choice, but it certainly is a rewarding one for storytelling. What drew you to this particular setting?

The idea for this film was certainly influenced by the fact that I have grown up in a family of psychologists and have been surrounded by their stories about the social system all my life. School is a specific system in which people often spend their whole life within the same group of colleagues in the same staffroom, closely connected by friendships, opinions and prejudices. Teaching job is one of the hardest jobs in our society: educational workers are responsible for the children they work with and specific problems they encounter daily, but at the same time they also have the symbolic duty of passing on the moral values that later define us subconsciously. For that reason I have always seen the staffroom as a symbol of the community in general, and I wanted to present it as a chatty, cyclic apparatus ridden with tensions. That is why in this film we move almost in circles through always the same school spaces, surrounded by a hubbub of voices that never really stops and thus makes the atmosphere more and more feverish and emotionally charged. Such a concrete, culturally loaded environment essentially gave me a story about maturing, about a young woman who has to accept that she is neither stronger nor nobler than the people around her.



Is the incident that starts the plot inspired by a specific event?

This film is based on a number of different experiences I've read about, talked about with educational workers or experienced myself in one way or another. In fact, I really wanted to step away from the concept of „case-story“ and create the almost indescribable helpless feeling we have in the real life when we belong to a closed community and are no longer capable of pinpointing how a certain problem actually began and why it can't be solved. We get wrapped in a complex net of relations that blurs a concrete problem, and we cannot deal with any particular case independently from that net, because we are emotionally too drained by the circumstances on the whole, for the initial event to seem of any importance any longer. However, like many small incidents that occur in this film, the character of the troublesome history teacher is based on the very concrete stories from our local environment. His type of behavior is so common, that the children actors I worked with in the film told me about the identical situations in their schools. That type of the „antagonist“ attracted me from the very beginning. I found someone so burdened by an eternal loop of unprocessed personal past to represent the symbolic paradigm of our community, especially when put in the socially slippery role of a teacher. But at the same time, my huge personal experience with such people drove me emotionally closer to him.

Your protagonist, Anamarija, is not a teacher but a school counsellor. What did her occupation bring into the story?

Anamarija is at the intersection of a whole net of interrelations. She is a mediator between the teachers, children, parents and the school principal. On the other hand, a school counselor can feel they don't belong to any firm circle, and their role is often belittled. Also, unlike teachers she does not have her own class, her own pupils, who are the greatest comfort to educational workers when the adult dimension of the staffroom takes up too much of their daily life. For that reason Anamarija is at the same time eager to fit in her new environment and move things forward, and that inner conflict is why she always finds herself in a problem. From the very beginning I believed that, because of her enormous courage and the warmth she exudes in front of the camera, Marina Redžepović was the actress who could perfectly embody Anamarija's somewhat self-mocking „naivete”, that has proven crucial in the atmosphere of the film.

One would expect that the relationship between Anamarija and Siniša, the teacher on whose toes she has stepped, would be antagonistic to the very end, but in yours it develops in an unexpected direction, making the story unpredictable. It's as if they have more things in common than one would think at first.

Siniša is in us all, we can understand him as a man lagging behind the times and we can empathize with his attitude that everybody around him is a fool. But, regardless of what he is like as a person, he can't be allowed to work as a teacher, and that is clear to Anamarija all the while. On the other hand, she slowly begins to realize that the antagonist really is somewhere else – in the much trickier relationship with the school principal, Anamarija's direct superior, who on a wider level symbolizes the heritage of petty corruption which is passed on through the community both hierarchically and generationally. In that atmosphere Siniša is but a drop in the ocean: even if his problem is solved, this other, crushing burden still remains. However, if she gives in to the feelings of bitterness and resentment because of that wider picture, Anamarija risks to end up exactly like him.

the staffroom · zbornica



pressbook

Folk songs tie in excellently with the ensemble structure of the story: they complement it, while adding an ironic distance. When did they become part of the process?

The songs performed by Lado, the national folk dance ensemble, were in the script from the very beginning. They were a great inspiration to me, and I used to listen to them for hours when I was writing the script. For me those songs symbolize the national heritage we absorb through the school system, while on the level of film language they come as a surprise. I think that every generation tackles its local cultural heritage in its own way and tries to give it its own interpretation. That is what I wanted, too. The rhythm of the folk wheel dance has its symbolic meaning translating to the rhythm of the film itself, but I also wanted to connect those throaty voices, ironic lyrics and wistful melodies on the emotional level with a certain moment in the plot, creating the impression that a complex emotion Anamarija is experiencing is actually a part of our common historical experience.

This film has a feel of a documentary, but it is stylized in a very subtle, discrete way: from the set and costumes reduced to only red and white colors, to the naive art paintings on the walls of the school. Why the naive art, and to what extent is it reflected in the other aspects of the film?

The colors also tie in with the theme of the community and collective experience. By stressing out the red and the white color in costumes and the set, I wanted to bring to mind our folk art and thus additionally emphasize the film's subtext – the symbolical level of the never-ending circularity of inherited attitudes and opinions. I found the contrast between the striking beauty of our local visual identity and the naturalistic presentation of human character very interesting. I was hoping it would create the impression that with the passing of time the characters almost start to suffocate in that atmosphere, that those visuals are a part of them, and at the same time a common burden weighing on them. The naive art also shows that side of human character, emphasizing the folk sentiment behind it. However, what I found most interesting in these paintings was the strong combination of madness and humor: a white goat flying through the red sky; people with turkey heads; protruding, tired eyes staring at „us“... On that humorous-emotional level they struck me as mirroring perfectly the festive, ludic merriment which is an important part of the film's atmosphere, especially because there is always a strong sense of melancholy underlying those scenes.

The stories about the conflict between an individual and the system often end in one of the two extremes: the triumph of the individual or their crushing defeat. What troubles Anamarija is the (im)possibility of a third option. Do you think there is a different way of solving such problems on personal and systematic level?

I struggled with that when I had to decide how to end the film, because through Anamarija I talked about a person within the system, about a worker, and I knew that every solution would necessarily reflect an attitude towards the question „and now what?“. This film is definitely about the spirit of defeatism gradually entering our lives and imperceptibly but inevitably changing our outlook on the world, playing the key emotional role in our later phase of growing up. Maybe because of my upbringing or cultural sensibility, the films in which an individual is bigger than the community and the stories in which the solution is fighting outside the system have never been my cup of tea, but I never liked glorifying the „I don't care“ attitude either. For that reason, primarily on the emotional level, it seemed important to me that in the end we can forgive Anamarija for failing to be a stronger version of herself. In choosing between resentment (like Siniša) and passivity (like her colleagues in the staffroom), I wanted to give her a third possibility: a small, still burning flame of defiance and rebelliousness, so that in the end we still celebrate her „middle finger“ which doesn't give up so easily. All with the hope that next year Anamarija will play the game much more wisely.





DIRECTOR

Sonja Tarokić

Sonja Tarokić (Zagreb, 1988) has an MA degree in film directing, and a BA degree in literature. She is the author of several short films. *On Shaky Ground* (2014), a dissection of a Mediterranean family that goes through the breakdown of its paterfamilias, was screened at Rotterdam IFF and awarded the best Croatian short at Zagreb Film Festival, while her other films (*You Bitch!*, *I'm a Self Made Woman*, *Smart Girls*, *Red*) were screened and awarded at numerous international festivals, such as Sarajevo FF, Vila do Conde, Angers Premiers Plans, NEXT Bucharest FF, Brief Encounters FF. She participated at CPH:Lab and Sarajevo Talent Campus workshops. *The Staffroom* is her first feature film, which was developed through TorinoFilmLab Script&Pitch 2015 and FrameWork 2016 program, winning the TFL Production Award.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Staffroom, 2021, 126'
On Shaky Ground, 2014, 29'
Birthday Party (co-directed with Hana Jušić), 2013, omnibus film
I'm a Self-made Woman, 2012, 26'
You Bitch!, 2011, 28'
Smart Girls (co-directed with Hana Jušić), 2010, 22'
Red, 2009, 25'

CAST

Marina Redžepović

Marina Redžepović was born in Sisak, Croatia. Since 1990 she lives in Zagreb, where she obtained a degree in French language and comparative literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. During her studies, she entered the world of acting through student films and acting workshops.

For the last 13 years Marina has been pursuing her acting career, mostly on film. So far she has played in 20-odd shorts and received film recognitions for some of them (*I'm a Self-Made Woman, You Bitch!*, *Full Circle*). She acted in several TV series and three theater plays. In her filmography she has a dozen feature-length films, with the prominent roles in *The Enchanting Porkers* directed by Ivan Livaković, *Summerhouse* directed by Damir Čučić, Predrag Ličina's zombie comedy *The Last Serb in Croatia* and *The Staffroom* directed by Sonja Tarokić, with whom she worked on several shorts. In *The Staffroom* Marina plays the main protagonist, school counselor Anamarija.

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Kinorama

Kinorama is a production company specialized for production of feature films, founded in Zagreb in 2003. Kinorama has produced 30 feature-length films, most of which co-productions, number of shorts and three TV series. Some films were top box office hits in cinemas, and all of them were screened at numerous festivals around the world - Cannes, Venice, Toronto, Karlovy Vary, among others. Kinorama's producer Ankica Juric Tilic was awarded Eurimages Co-production Award at EFA's award ceremony 2019.

facts&figures

Original Title: Zbornica
English Title: The Staffroom
Genre: Drama
Country: Croatia
Language: Croatian
Year: 2021
Duration: 126 min.
Picture: Color
Aspect Ratio: 2.39 : 1
Sound: 5.1
Available Format: DCP

cast

Marina Redžepović
Stojan Matavulj
Nives Ivanković
Maja Posavec
Sandra Lončarić

crew

Director: Sonja Tarokić
Screenplay: Sonja Tarokić
Cinematography: Danko Vučinović
Editing: Borna Buljević
Set Design: Tajana Čanić Stanković
Costume Design: Katarina Pilić
Sound: Borna Buljević
Producer: Ankica Jurić Tilić

Production company: Kinorama, Croatia
Associate producer: KinoElektron, France

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