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LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
Official Selection

QUIET LIFE

A film by ALEXANDROS AVRANAS





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QUIET LIFE

A film by ALEXANDROS AVRANAS

France - Germany - Sweden - Estonia - Greece - Finland
99 min - Scope - Digital 5.1

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SCREENINGS AT VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

QUIET LIFE

BY ALEXANDROS AVRANAS

PRESS & INDUSTRY SCREENING

AUGUST 28 2024

7:30 PM

SALA VOLPI

PRESS & INDUSTRY SCREENING

AUGUST 28 2024

10:00 PM

SALA CASINO

OFFICIAL SCREENING - WORLD
PREMIERE (TICKETS)

AUGUST 29 2024

4:45 PM

SALA DARSENA

OFFICIAL RE-RUN (TICKETS)

AUGUST 30 2024

1:45 PM

PALABIENNALE



Sweden, 2018. A mysterious syndrome affecting refugee children is sparking concerns among doctors and politicians.

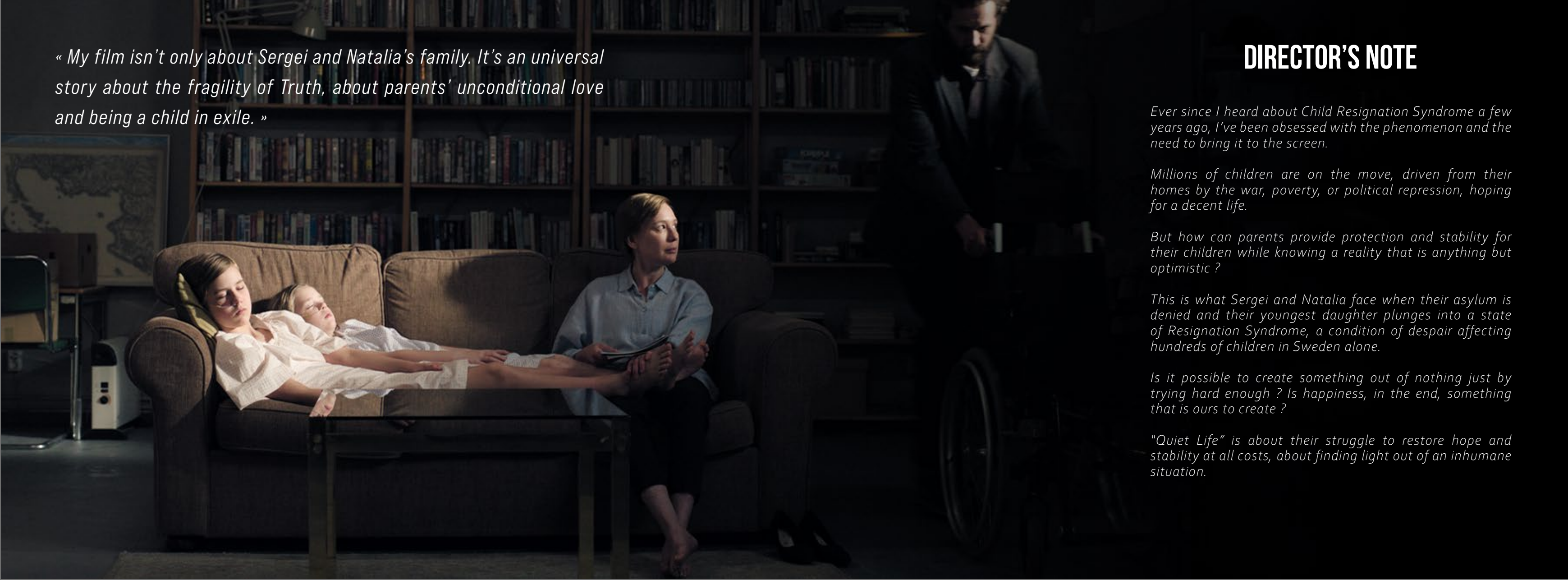
Sergei and Natalia have been forced to flee from their native country after an attack that almost took Sergei's life. They have settled with their two young daughters in Sweden, waiting for the Migration board to decide on their Asylum Application.

They try their best to lead a normal life. They work hard, send their kids to Swedish school, learn the language, submitting themselves to regular inspections from the authorities and hoping that one day, they will be Swedish citizens.

But when their asylum application is rejected, Katja, their youngest daughter collapses and falls into a mysterious coma.

Faced with a moral dilemma, Sergei and Natalia's resilience will be tested. Can they summon hope to save their daughters?

Inspired by real events.



« My film isn't only about Sergei and Natalia's family. It's an universal story about the fragility of Truth, about parents' unconditional love and being a child in exile. »

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Ever since I heard about Child Resignation Syndrome a few years ago, I've been obsessed with the phenomenon and the need to bring it to the screen.

Millions of children are on the move, driven from their homes by the war, poverty, or political repression, hoping for a decent life.

But how can parents provide protection and stability for their children while knowing a reality that is anything but optimistic ?

This is what Sergei and Natalia face when their asylum is denied and their youngest daughter plunges into a state of Resignation Syndrome, a condition of despair affecting hundreds of children in Sweden alone.

Is it possible to create something out of nothing just by trying hard enough ? Is happiness, in the end, something that is ours to create ?

"Quiet Life" is about their struggle to restore hope and stability at all costs, about finding light out of an inhumane situation.

«Mass psychogenic illness is also called mass sociogenic illness. It seems a more fitting name because it suggests it is a social disorder, more than a psychological or biological one. Sometimes doctors are so busy looking inside people's heads that they forget the social factors creating illness.»

by Neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan - THE GUARDIAN, 2021

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESIGNATION SYNDROME:

BBC

THE
NEW YORKER

NETFLIX

The
Guardian

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDROS AVRANAS

by Clémentine Goldszal

Resignation syndrome is a largely unknown phenomenon that mainly affect children. Why did you decide to make a film about it?

AA: In 2018, I read an article in the New Yorker about this “Resignation Syndrome”, and it captivated me because it reminded me of a fairy tale and, at the same time, a kind of dystopia. What struck me the most was that it had been kept under wraps for over twenty years, despite affecting hundreds of children in Sweden since the early 2000s. I immediately saw an opportunity to talk about broader issues, such as the power of the state over individuals, and to highlight important questions as “What kind of society are we leaving to our children?” and “What does it mean to fight for a better life?” But as soon as I started writing, my primary goal was to find the humanity and love within these larger issues, and to tell the story of the weight and responsibility of each person’s actions.

How did you research this syndrome?

AA: I started reading everything I could find and watching documentaries. Then, I met the two leading specialists in the syndrome in the world: Dr. Elisabeth Hultcrantz, who fought to get this syndrome, largely recognized by the scientific and political communities, and Dr. Karl Sallin, from Karolinska Institutet, who was assigned by the Swedish State to research the syndrome from its origins in 1998 until now. I also read an article about Arash Javanbakht, an American doctor who participated in a major study on the subject initiated by Sweden in 2018. According to him, these children generally come from countries where they are persecuted or subjected to traumatic experiences that are too intense for their young minds.

Some initially denied the existence of the syndrome, suggesting that families were manipulating the situation to obtain the right to asylum. It was only in 2014 that it was officially recognized as a pathology in Sweden. Today, the causes are better understood, and it is known to be a post-traumatic protection mechanism, a reaction to the fear of having to return to their country of origin. In fact, children generally wake up once their families receive permission to stay in the country.

Of course, I then moved away from certain facts to build my characters and the story of *Quiet Life*.



That evokes the visual codes of genre films before evolving into something more human. How did you develop the visual identity of the film? Was it part of the project from the start?

AA: From the beginning, I wanted to create a Kafkaesque atmosphere, a kind of administrative dystopia, bordering on science fiction. I wanted to translate onto the screen that strange fairy tale dimension I felt when I first discovered this syndrome. In my imagination, the two girls looked like Sleeping Beauties.

In the first part of the film, we wanted to remain faithful to both reality and facts, which explains the austere appearance at the beginning. There is a clinic as shown in the film, where it is believed that children heal faster if they are separated from their parents. However, in the second part of the film, the initial coldness shatters to make way for the family's reconstruction. The parents create a protective bubble and an imaginary world to give their daughters a sense of security. Hope emerges, and life returns.

Why did you choose to place a Russian family at the heart of the film? Is there a connection to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine?

AA: The film is set in 2018, well before the war in Ukraine began. At that time, Russia was already a dictatorship in all but name. The first cases involved refugee children from both former USSR and Yugoslavia countries. The 2018 New Yorker article actually told the story of a little boy whose



family had fled Russia for political reasons. Why children from these countries were initially more affected, I don't know, but there certainly seemed to be a cultural bias.

However, I don't think this is the central question of the film. Natalia, Sergei, and their daughters are Russian, but they could just as well have been Afghan, Iranian, or Palestinian...

Can we say that your film addresses the traumatic consequences of politics?

AA: Of course. From the very beginning, my co-writer, Stavros Pamballis, and I agreed that this was an important context for us; a way in to the story, and the characters. Both of us were born and raised in countries with very recent memories of coups, wars and displacements. The lived, or inherited, trauma of political turmoil is in our blood. Developing this story in the midst of recent world events has made this context even stronger for us. War seems to be all around us, creating refugees who are increasingly being treated as second class humans by western society. Meanwhile, our world seems to be spiralling into a climate crisis which affects all of us and is already creating new waves of climate refugees and economic migration. As a political system, the response to all this has been a rising coldness, political correctness, a need to build walls; to become apathetic, rather than empathetic. In the film, we tried to find a counterbalance to all this, through humanity and love.

Why is the film set in Sweden?

AA: The syndrome was first observed in Sweden. It's very mysterious, especially since there's a certain idealization of Swedish society. It thus seemed natural to set the story in this country. Even though it is often held up as an example, the Swedish model is not without problems. But this is obviously not unique to Sweden. Many countries get lost in the systems they have created, in political correctness, and the repression of feelings. However, I'm not interested in criticism. In the film, I have a certain tenderness even for the characters responsible for this dystopian administration. They are prisoners of the system, like everyone else.

How did you approach Chulpan Khamatova, a major star of Russian Theater and Cinema, to take part in the film?

AA: I've discovered Chulpan in *Goodbye, Lenin!* and have followed her career since then, from *Paper Soldier* to the more recent *Petrov's Flu*. When I sent her the script, she immediately identified with the character of Natalia because she was experiencing a similar situation in real life at that time. She had just left her country and was herself in exile. She could not better understand the upheaval of changing one's life overnight and the dilemmas Sergei and Natalia face in protecting their family. She was moved by the story and agreed to join us on this adventure, much to my delight.



And how did you go about casting Sergei?

AA: I interviewed many actors for this role but when I first met Grigory, and we discussed the role, I instantly felt that he could embody the weight that Sergei carries from the very beginning of the film: that combination of anger, and fear that comes with being the victim of a murder attack in your own country, mixed with the defiance of a proud and wounded man who wants to fight for what he believes in, and the guilt of a father who knows his family is suffering because of those very beliefs and convictions. This mix can be paralysing. On the outside, Sergei might seem passive, even indifferent, when we first meet him, but Grigory helped bring to life the journey of this character back to personal agency and emotional expression.

The two young actresses are impressively accurate. How did you specifically work with the children?

AA: We searched for them in several countries for almost a year and a half: in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and even Berlin. I wanted these little girls to be as authentic as possible, with a natural acting strength. In the film, they shouldn't be involved in their parents' issues but they suffer the consequences and are the victims. They play a crucial role in the story. For several months, the main casting director, Piret Toomvap-Schönberg, sent me videos and photos so I could make an initial selection. Subsequently, we organized a workshop in Estonia with 70 children that lasted four days, at the end of which I made my final decision.

During the filming, it was essential for me to be clear with them and explain everything, trusting their intelligence and capacity even though they didn't have these experience themselves and had to use their own imagination. They did not speak English, so Chulpan and Grigory helped me a lot with translation. These interactions created a strong bond among the four of them. Naturally, they truly became a family. It was essential for me that the actors felt what their characters feel. That's why I always do a lot of rehearsals.

This film is also about parenting, family, and the search for a home to ensure the safety of one's children. Isn't this the central question of the film?

AA: From the moment I started writing, my primary goal was to find humanity and love through the big questions posed by the film. With my co-writer, our aim was to strike a balance between the repercussions of state politics and the reconstruction of the family. We dedicated a lot of time to this. Natalia and Sergei, the parents in the film, are emigrants who initially try to conform. This family plays by the system's rules, does what is asked of them, but it divides them and makes them lose sight of who they truly are. However, the love and humanity they reintroduce into

their lives are beneficial for their daughters. By freeing themselves from this cold and dehumanizing bureaucracy, they rediscover themselves as a couple and rebuild their family.

What happens to their children drives them to regain control of their lives. I believe that the younger generations will save us and that children, around whom the film opens and closes, have the power to absolve their parents of their mistakes.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHULPAN KHAMATOVA

by serge kaganski

How did you react when you first read the script of *Quiet Life*?

CK: In the past, I've worked with associations dealing with children's diseases, so I was deeply touched and shocked by the subject of this movie. I even spoke with my doctor friends about this "Resignation Syndrome" affecting exiled children and none of them had heard of it. To me, this script looks like a Greek tragedy. As an actress, I was really happy to read this script because I enjoyed it very much, and when I decided to be a part of this project, I was very happy to be able to play this character. I believe that not only should we speak about the issues presented in the film, but that we should speak about it very loudly.

How do you perceive your character, Natalia?

CK: I think that Natalia is a fighter at heart, who tries to battle against the indifference of the world. She is ready to do everything in her power to save her children, whether in Russia, in Sweden or anywhere else. She is prepared to fight against a system. She is full of love, and she believes that love is a force that can save her children and maybe even the world. For her, love is the most powerful weapon.

How do you view Sergei, and his relationship with Natalia and their daughter, Alina?

CK: They all face an awful situation. As a husband and father, Sergei is trying his best to protect his family, but he is only a human being, and has his own weaknesses. Both Sergei and Natalia are under extreme pressure, and at times react instinctively, like animals. They were forced to escape from Russia because of Russian police and government's threats, but they will face new challenges in Sweden, where they desire to stay. Sergei dreams of being a good father, but he is in a situation of weakness. In truth, every member of this family, both children and parents, is in desperate need of help.

Sergei is very hard on his daughter. Do you think that he's too harsh or is he trying to prepare her to be a fighter for their own good?

CK: Yes, he is hard, but it's for the benefit of his family. It's a paradox. There's another scene where Natalia visits Adriana, a nurse with a child from Montenegro and after that visit, Natalia also loses control and pushes her daughter too much. Under such circumstances and immense pressure, neither of them can act like typical, nurturing parents, unfortunately. That being said, it's fascinating for an actor to explore all the different sides of a character, and to show the duality of being both strong and weak, kind and bad.

Your character has very few dialogs in the film. You must have had to play in silence in a lot of scenes. How challenging was it to convey so much through facial expressions and body language alone?

CK: It is as challenging to act with words than without. I even asked Alexandros at times to give me more lines, but he insisted on keeping it minimal. In truth, I thank him for giving me the possibility to act without words. Very often, a director focus on shooting an actor who is saying his line but not the actor who is listening to it. Alexandros gave me a lot of screen presence even in silence and I could express my character's feelings without words. I'm very grateful for that.

In the movie, the family flees from Russia because of the lack of freedom there, and by doing that, they risk their lives. They settle in Sweden, a country who has the reputation of being very liberal and democratic. Though, the film portrays a cold and dystopian Sweden. How do you feel about this depiction the way Sweden is portrayed?

CK: To me, it's a metaphor rather than a realistic portrayal of Sweden. Alexandros and his scriptwriter did thorough research before shooting, visiting Sweden and all the locations shown in the film. While the movie is based on reality, it also serves as a broader metaphor. It takes place in Sweden, but it could have been set in England, France, Russia, because the message is universal. To me, the Sweden that we see in *Quiet Life* represents a general system that is indifferent to individuals, their problems and their feelings. I believe that *Quiet Life* is a powerful metaphor for how institutions can work against people. A metaphor for their coldness towards the specific human needs of individuals.

As a Russian refugee yourself, did you feel a personal connection to Natalia?

CK: Absolutely. I feel it in my bones - what it's like to leave your country to be in a foreign one, to not belong, and to watch your children master the new language better than you. I live in Latvia, and while I can now speak Latvian, my children picked it up much faster and more fluently than I did.

Did your own exile experience influence your portrayal of Natalia?

CK: It definitely did. When you've already lived through what your character is experiencing, it's much easier to play the role and to bring authenticity to it. All the personal griefs I've faced found their way into my portrayal of Natalia. I didn't need to research to play this character, it is already in my blood, in my DNA. I mean, I knew the anxiety of waiting for a commission to decide if I could stay in a new country with my family, and it helped me a lot to play Natalia.

***Quiet Life* is set in 2018. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine (though the issue began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea). In light of the current war situation, do you think the film has taken on an even deeper significance?**

CK: Yes, I think so. The roots of the problems faced by exiled children were already present in 2018, but today, in Europe, there are thousands of Ukrainian refugees. All these families fled Ukraine to save their lives, and are now trying to rebuild from scratch in a new culture, with a new language, new schools, new friends... For children, this is not easy. There are also one million Russians who have left our country and must restart from zero. This is a huge problem, especially for children. I am deeply concerned about this. As adults, we are responsible for our children, and this is at the heart of this film. Working with childcare association also helped me a lot to play Natalia. Making this film was a little bit like a psychoanalysis for me. We shot it a year ago, and everything concerning exile was still so fresh for me, especially with the daily news of the war in the media. I was receiving awful news from Russia, and I was always wondering what had happened to my friends. During filming, a close friend of mine, the young theater director Evgenia Berkovich, was sentenced to 6 years in jail for no reason: she simply wrote some poetry against the war. I think it's important for the world to be aware of what's happening in Russia: innocent and talented people like Evgenia are in prison. The Russian government has destroyed her life, and the lives of her adopted children.

***Quiet Life* is visually striking, with a carefully designed style. What was your working relationship with Alexandros Avranas?**

CK: Working with him was really interesting. His style is so cold and refined, but inside him, he has a very warm heart, and he can be very emotional. This mix of emotion and style created a very interesting cocktail. Alexandros uses very few words and minimal dialogue. As an artist, he doesn't try to explain everything, which is great. Instead, he likes to capture things that are behind the words or behind the movements of the body. For me, it was a fantastic experience. Alexandros is a very talented director and a very brave person. He called me when no one else wanted to work with a Russian artist. But it was very important to him that the Russian character be played by a Russian actor or actress. He followed his convictions, and we made the movie. I really admire his braveness. In a way, he also fights against the system.

Near the end of *Quiet Life*, there's a beautiful and powerful scene where all the family swim together in a pool, which feels symbolic of rebirth. How do you interpret this scene?

CK: This scene makes us feel the connection with nature; it reminds us that we are fundamentally human beings, capable of love and mutual support. This scene tells us that we are part of nature and that all conflicts and problems can be resolved through love and grace.



ALEXANDROS AVRANAS

Alexandros Avranas was born in Larissa in 1977. He studied at U.d.K Berlin. After directing several short films, art pieces and documentaries, his first feature film, Without, won 7 awards (including best film, best new director, best actress, best cinematography and best editing) in the National Section of the 49th Thessaloniki International Film Festival. His next film, Miss Violence, received the Silver Lion for Best Director, the Coppa Volpi for Best Actor and 3 collateral awards, at the 70th Venice international Film Festival. The film went on to win 12 international awards including Best Script at the Stockholm International Film Festival. His most recent film Love Me Not, 2017, premiered in competition at the 65th San Sebastián Film Festival and was distributed internationally. Between his feature films, Alexandros directs works for the stage, with his most recent play premiering at the National Theater of Greece. In 2019, Alexandros served as the Artistic Director of the CIAK, Puglia Experience Scriptwriting Workshop which took place in Northern Greece and Southern Italy.

FILMOGRAPHY

2024 : QUIET LIFE

98 MIN

Co-written with Stavros Pamballis

Produced by LES FILMS DU WORSO (France) In coproduction with ELLE DRIVER (France), SENATOR FILM PRODUKTION (Germany), FOX IN THE SNOW(Sweden), AMRION (Estonia), PLAYGROUND, ASTERISK (Greece), MAKING MOVIES (Finland)

2017 : LOVE ME NOT

102 MIN

(San Sebastian 2017 - Official selection)

Written & Directed by Alexandros Avranas

Produced by FALIRO HOUSE, LES FILMS DU LENDEMAIN, BLONDE SA, ERT, ONASSIS FOUNDATION

2016 : DARK CRIMES

96 MIN

Written by Jeremy Brock

With Jim Carrey and Charlotte Gainsbourg

Produced by David Gerson, RATPACK

2013 : MISS VIOLENCE

99 MIN

(Venice 2013 - Silver Lion for Best director, Volpi Cup for Best Actor, Arca CinemaGiovani Award, Fedeora Award for Best Euro-Mediterranean film)

Written & Directed by Alexandros Avranas

Produced by FALIRO HOUSE PRODUCTIONS and PLAYS2PLACE PRODUCTIONS

2009 : WITHOUT

82 MIN - 35 mm

Co-written with Ioanna Rapti

Produced by NIKS-MOVIES

CAST

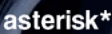
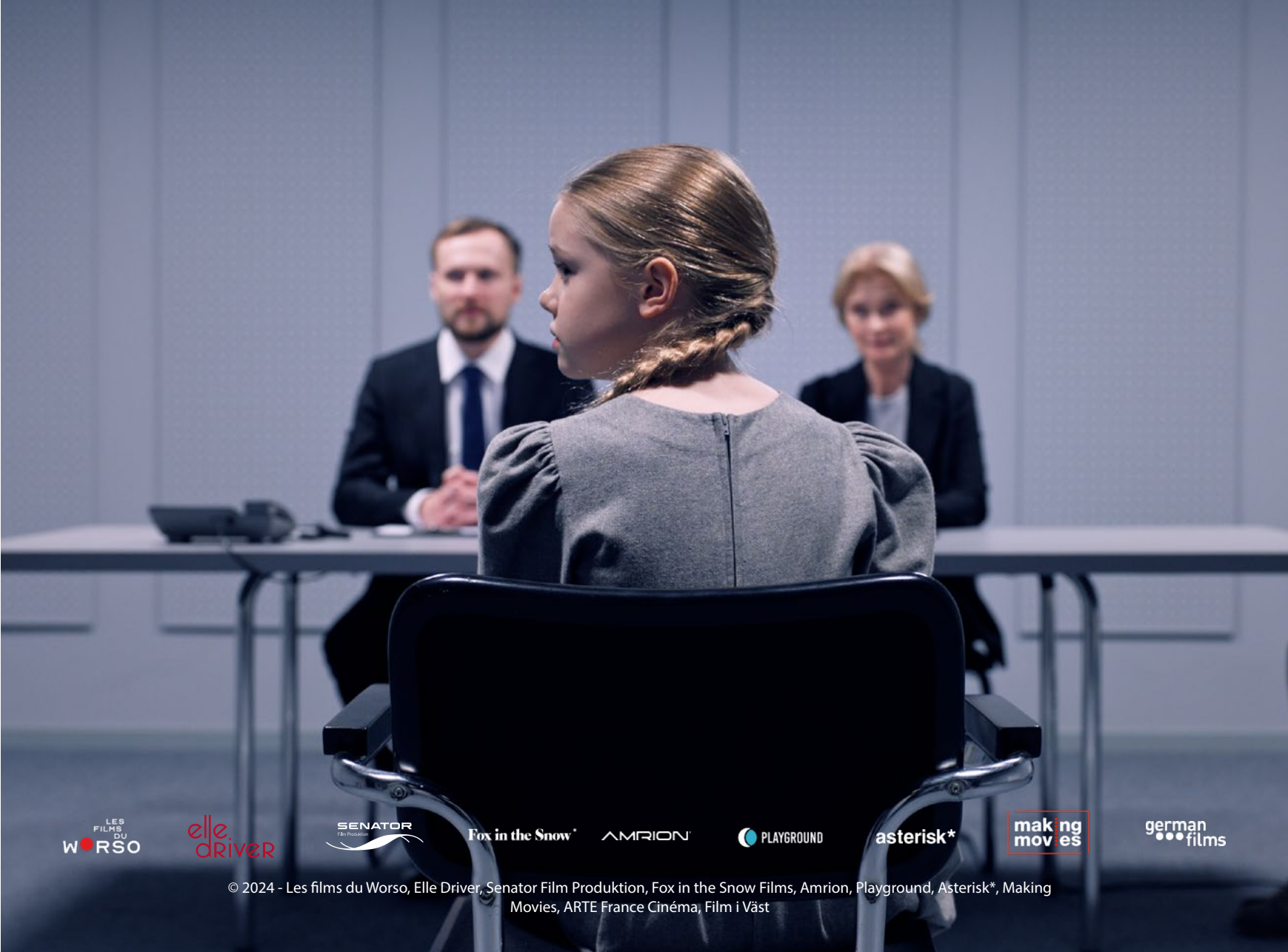
NATALIA Chulpan Khamatova
SERGEI Grigory Dobrygin
ALINA Naomi Lamp
KATJA Miroslava Pashutina
ADRIANA Eleni Roussinou

TECHNICAL SHEET

DIRECTOR Alexandros Avranas SCREENPLAY Stavros Pamballis & Alexandros Avranas CINEMATOGRAPHER Olympia Mytilinaiou, GSC
PRODUCTION DESIGNER Markku Pätilä COSTUME DESIGNER Jaanus Vahtra
EDITING Dounia Sichov SOUND & MIXING Kristjan Kurm & Kostas Varympopiotis & Persefoni Miliou ORIGINAL SCORE Tuomas Kantelinen

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