

# Drazen Zarkovic about MY GRANDPA IS AN ALIEN

## “We cherish a bit of eccentricity”

Ignored by her classmates, Una has grandpa as her best friend. But one night, when strange light beams are circling over the garden, grandpa disappears. Kidnapped by aliens! That’s a story nobody would believe. Until Una meets the small robot Dodo, who shares with her a family secret: your grandpa is an alien! When her mother suddenly gets sick, Una and her robotic friend have only 24 hours to find grandpa and save mum.

MY GRANDPA IS AN ALIEN is an original sci-fi adventure for kids, looking utterly elegant in its visual design, just as much in space as in its depiction of ordinary, everyday life. Co-director Drazen Zarkovic was delighted by the welcome his film received at the Zlin Festival: “In this big venue with hundreds of kids, I got really overwhelmed by the crowd’s enthusiasm.”

Drazen Zarkovic: From the very beginning we were aware of the fact that in the sci-fi genre we are “competing” with STAR WARS and Marvel superhe-

roes. Throughout the entire production process we were fanatically striving for that “visual elegance” that you mention. A large part of that credit goes to our experienced DoP Sven Pepeonik, who has shot hundreds of visually stunning commercials. He was our first and only choice for this movie.

**I’m sure a profound dose of DIY was included too, finding creative solutions for practical problems.**

Zarkovic: Of course! Like the scenes set in the basement where a spaceship crashed 30 years ago. I’ll tell you the secret of how those glittering space dust particles were created: we used a special detergent for cleaning carpets, containing a percentage of phosphor, which glows in the dark when shining an ultraviolet spotlight on it. Welcome to space!

**What were the most challenging aspects of the shooting?**

Zarkovic: The one week of night shoots was very demanding for the entire crew, although the atmosphere

on the set was great and very lively. Young actress Lana Hranjec was the bravest of them all. At five in the morning she was our ‘last man standing’, ready to do one more take. And then there was Una’s boat trip on the river. We took all the required safety precautions: life jackets, divers on standby, we had Una’s boat attached to a steel rope so we could navigate its movements...

**And that’s when Una starts singing! We’ve seen famous artists in concert as holograms, we’ve seen duets sang with people who died years ago, but have we ever seen a duet between a robot and a girl?**

Zarkovic: My co-director Marina Andree Škop is, among many other things, a director of music videos. This was totally her idea. She insisted on including some sort of musical sequence in the film. Initially I was a bit suspicious but it all turned out really beautiful. A professional beatboxer helped Lana to practice her performance.



**How exactly did you work with Dodo, the robot?**

Zarkovic: Dodo was originally designed by Croatian illustrator Zdenko Bašić and then brought to life by Czech professionals, specialising in working with puppetry and animatronics. Dodo’s movements were controlled by three puppeteers with remote controls: one for the wheels, one for the head and one for the arms. What you see on screen is what we saw on the set: a little robot that actually rides around and moves his arms and head. But what makes an animated character finally ‘real’ are the eyes. Those were added in post-production. In 350





shots the eye movements were animated, and that's when Dodo really got his 'soul'.

#### How did you organise your tasks together with Marina?

Zarkovic: On a technical level this was a demanding movie to make. Therefore we split the directors' duties, and I'm very happy we did! The making of MY GRANDPA took us seven years, from the first idea till the final movie. Marina and I go way back, we attended film school together, she edited my first student film. We share the same energy and the same taste for movies, and we tend to agree easily on almost everything. On the set our tasks were clearly divided, so the crew knew exactly who was responsible for what. Being more experienced as a filmmaker

(MY GRANDPA is my fifth feature) I was dealing with technical issues, while Marina was working with the actors. But actually we were consulting each other on every single detail. It's very convenient to have someone with you all the time with whom you can check every idea. I truly recommend it.

#### Your main actress Lana Hranjec doesn't look like any average kid.

Zarkovic: Lana is special. She actually is an accomplished dancer and therefore used to endless rehearsals and hard work. Acting out face to face with a dead object like a robot, with two directors feeding you dialogue lines from behind the camera, is a complicated procedure, even for more experienced actors than Lana –



Co-director Drazen Zarkovic (Zlin Film Festival)

she was only 10 when we made the film. But she pulled it off relatively easily, due to her experience as a dancer. Lana is not your typical 'cute little girl' character. Also as a person, she has strong opinions about almost everything. That is something that can't be taught or trained, she simply 'has it'.

#### MY GRANDPA IS AN ALIEN depicts family relationships with a lot of quarrelling, and a lot of warm love shared with stolen kisses and kind words. That's how things should be in a loving family?

Zarkovic: That was absolutely our intention. Marina, producer Darija Kulenovic Gudan, scriptwriter Pavlica Bajsic and myself, we all have children of Una's age. Our own family experi-

ences marked the entire movie making process.

#### Although mum asks her father to "try to act normal" at the same time this film makes a plea for everyone's right to be eccentric, to be an outsider from time to time.

Zarkovic: The Croatian song that Una's mother is listening to (and that you hear during the end credits) is titled "Totally different than anybody else". It was a huge radio-hit in the 80's in Croatia. Yes, we cherish a bit of eccentricity and everybody's right to be and feel different.

–  
Gert Hermans

## Co-director Marina Andree Škop about co-producing “We’ve made a small miracle happen”

At the KIDS Regio Forum in Weimar, Marina Andree Škop (Studio Dim) told participants about the benefits of co-production and the complex construction behind MY GRANDPA IS AN ALIEN. Škop: “Sci-fi by definition is expensive, because of the special effects. But as producers we’ve made a small miracle happen, making this film on a €1,2 million budget. The first version of our script didn’t score very well on the international co-production market. We asked two extra authors to give the story a more international appeal, and that seemed to work. First Bosnia came on board, followed later by other low capacity countries, like the Czech & Slovak Republic and Slovenia.”

“As our sci-fi movie can’t compete with the international blockbusters for the same target audience, we aimed for something special, something to make us stand out. More than money, what we were really after were the specific qualifications of the international partners that we teamed up with: studio Magiclub and

Martin Peč and his group of puppeteers and animatronic artists (Czech), Michal Struss and his team of animators (Slovak), promotion bureau Fabrika (Bosnian), director of photography Sven Pepeonik (Slovenia) etc.”

Then Norway signed up. “We met with Filmbin at Cinekid, where both of us were celebrating being granted MEDIA development funding. We kept on meeting each other in different markets, and finally decided to team up. We appreciate how Filmbin (with its long experience in children’s films) got involved with every single aspect of the movie. The music and sound post production were done in Lillehammer and Nils Ole Oftebro, the Norwegian actor playing grandpa, looks a bit ‘alien’ through Balkan eyes.”

Luxembourg was the last country to come on board. Then with all partners from seven countries, everything was discussed via Skype and via an online post production framework. “Modern technology allowed us to pull it off.

It was extremely important to have a production coordinator, spreading all information at the right moment. That role was crucial. Working with this melting pot of people, for me, was an eye-opener. I loved this construction and I loved our multidisciplinary crew. Maybe that could be the future production model for low capacity countries like us. The film had 30.000 admissions in Croatia, but just a few thousands in Slovakia. It still has to be theatrically released in Slovenia and Czech Republic in September and in Luxembourg and Norway in October.”

### Educating Aliens

The educative project ‘Movies are not aliens’ enables teachers and pupils to make best use of MY GRANDPA IS AN ALIEN’s educational potential. A series of materials and activities aimed at educators, parents and young people encourages them to discuss the film in a critical, analytical way and to get more familiar with the various aspects of filmmaking. ‘Movies are not aliens’ was created by production company Studio Dim in cooperation

with the Croatian Audio-visual Centre, Croatian Film Federation, KinoKino Festival, media literacy portal medijskapismenost.hr and launched by the Agency for Electronic Media and UNICEF Croatia.

The core of the project is a freely available [35 page publication](#) for educators, and a series of [‘making of’ clips](#) illustrating the filmmaking process through the eyes of the young main actress. Marina Andree Škop: “To make teachers more familiar with this methodical approach, we are organising special screenings in which our educators conduct a pilot discussion with the audience. Afterwards teachers have to fill out an online questionnaire via mobile phones. With this new format, the ‘Movies are not aliens’ pilot project sets the tone for the future of film literacy education in Croatian schools.”

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