

# Neven Hitrec about THE DIARY OF PAULINA P

## “We created drama with nothing but good people”

Paulina's start in the third grade comes with new obstacles: a fight with her best friend, a haunted house around the corner, and a new classmate trying to steal her friend. Even the choice between two admirers is more complicated than expected. At home things aren't going too well either, now that mum and dad always seem to be arguing. Despite all these difficulties Paulina keeps on spreading energy and love towards the people around her.

Based on a famous children's book, this film shifts into all gears at once. Everything moves, everything is colour and sound, with the camera moving to the rhythm of Paulina's restless brain. The best thing to do is sit back, experience the tidal wave and wonder: what the hell is this all about?

Neven Hitrec: The story is based on a diary, stacking one element upon the other in a mosaic manner. We show you the inner world of a 10 year old girl with a vivid imagination. My main task as a director was the audio-visual

stylisation of the world inside her head.

**I thought it was creating order in chaos.**

Hitrec: Also true. This was by far the most complicated project I ever did with children. There are so many elements to the story, and my task was to combine them all into one solid piece, with a positive vibe, different types of humour and a crucial role for imagination. There are only two strong emotional scenes - Paulina and her mother talking about the painting, and dad welling up in tears - taking us to the edge of classic drama, but we decided to serve our emotions more smoothly around the edges.

**Where reality and fantasy come together, life can be so beautiful.**

Hitrec: This film deals with several sad subjects - like divorce, the loss of a friend, lovesickness, etc. and one girl who has the spirit, the energy and the self-confidence to handle them all in her own way. I tend to always take a different, multidimensional view on

events, also in a so-called children's movie.

**Why so-called?**

Hitrec: Because it's a serious job. I have experiences with commercials, feature films and animations, with TV-series, documentaries and comic books, and I have my life experience. I needed to combine them all to make a children's film. When working with 20 or 30 children every day, you need to be a director, a psychologist and a parent simultaneously. Those kids never stopped asking questions. They brought the ups and downs from their personal lives to the set whereas we had to keep the atmosphere as light and relaxed as possible. That is why making children's films might be the hardest job in the industry.

**Paulina seems like a 100% person in whatever she does.**

Hitrec: The young actress Katja Matkovic is exactly the same. She is very clever and has loads of energy. She stood out among the other kids and got along very well with the older ac-



tors, like Judita Frankovic (playing her mother) and Ksenija Marinkovic (her grandma). Being at work every day, every child has its limits, but without her, this would have been a totally different movie.

**There is the character of the teacher, who is still/again living with his parents.**

Hitrec: With the many divorces we're having in Croatia, this is not unusual nowadays. Maybe it is a sense of Mediterranean culture - in Italy it seems quite normal to be 35 and live with your parents - and for young families it has become more and more difficult to rent their own flat. In the movie it



is used as a both dramatic and comical element.

### **That teacher is able to set things in motion.**

Hitrec: The Croatian school system doesn't see every child as an individual. Kids are just numbers in a system who have to fulfil their tasks; standing up to voice your opinion is not a common thing to do. But this guy has all the qualities of a good teacher, he is honest and empathic. Actually this film has no negative characters; everyone is good, or at least tries to be. We created drama with nothing but good people. And if - for some reason - there might be a fight, there's always pancakes to ease the tension.

### **Maybe the dog was a bad character?**

Hitrec: Not bad, only heavy. If you think a director's role is to create order in the chaos, you should know that as long as the dog was on the set, there was nothing but chaos. The last scene we shot - the dog running from the TV-set towards the parents - took us half a day. I kept on telling that dog: start acting! But he didn't listen.

### **Are you still on speaking terms with the costume and set design department? You made them work very**



### **hard!**

Hitrec: The production was rather demanding and expensive, especially since we shot in different periods, winter and summer. We had 35 shooting days for a story with 60 actors (including many children), 500 extras, a dog and plenty of locations. This was a 99% Croatian production - the international input came from Slovenian studios for animation and sound design - but most of the crew was local, including our DoP Dragan Markovic and the brilliant composer Darko Hajssek. In some scenes we follow the musical tradition of the Zagreb School for Animation, using one particular instrument to convey a specific emo-

tion - like a flute solo under a wedding scene. The rest of the soundtrack is a mixture of different genres, reflecting the richness and versatility of a young girl's mind.

### **You named Alice in Wonderland as an inspiration.**

Hitrec: This is a fantasy story about a girl, balancing between vulnerability and assertiveness, surrounded by the craziest characters. We often see films about outcasts fighting their way into acceptance. Paulina is different: she is confident; what you see is what you get and you have to take her like she is.

### **You already had a Croatian release.**

Producer Jure Busic: Yes, reaching over 100,000 domestic admissions! That's a fabulous number for such a small country - we almost beat SUPER MARIO in Croatia. Our distribution plan was to immediately combine cinema and festival distribution, releasing the film last spring. We're having our European festival premiere in Schlingel, but we already won festival awards in Egypt and Morocco. In 2024 we are selected for festivals in Taiwan, Algeria, Sweden, and many other festivals. After pleasing our local audience, now we're getting international recognition.

### **And the next thing will be... a sequel.**

Busic: We are in the development phase. We have a script about 11 year old Paulina that in my opinion is even better than the first one. We already got production support from the Croatian Audio-visual Centre and we're currently looking for co-production partners and sales agents.

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Gert Hermans