

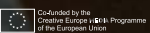


SANDBAG DAMI

BY ČEJEN ČERNIČ ČAMAK



75th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Generation



SYNOPSIS

As a rising river threatens to flood his village, high school senior Marko's seemingly stable life is disrupted by the return of Slaven, his former childhood friend and forbidden first love. Marko lives with his parents and younger brother Fićo, a boy with Down syndrome to whom he is deeply devoted. A gifted athlete, Marko is also preparing to follow his father's plan for him to become an auto mechanic. From the moment Slaven unexpectedly returns for his father's funeral, Marko struggles to stay focused on his girlfriend Petra and the upcoming qualifying tournament. But as the looming flood draws closer, so does the emotional turmoil within him. While the villagers work tirelessly to build sandbag walls around their homes, Marko is building a wall of his own – one meant to keep his emotions at bay. Yet, like water, feelings have a way of breaking through...





SANDBAG DAM



**INTERVIEW
WITH ČEJEN
ČERNIĆ ČANAK**

SANDBAG DAM

Following your debut feature, the exceptionally successful teen adventure film ‘The Mystery of Green Hill’ (‘Uzbuna na Zelenom Vrhu’), you decided to continue exploring youth themes with ‘Sandbag Dam’, but this time tackling a much more complex subject matter – same-sex love stigmatized by the community. What drove this choice?

‘Sandbag Dam’ was an entirely unplanned and unexpected love at first sight, or rather, at first read. A little over six years ago, I was working on a screenplay of my own and was convinced that I had neither the capacity nor the interest for anything else. Then producer Ankica Jurić Tilić told me about a truly extraordinary and wonderful screenplay by Tomislav Zajec. I clearly remember her saying: ‘This feels like a perfect match for your sensibility’. I also remember being sure I would turn it down, because my focus was elsewhere. Next thing I knew, I was sitting on my couch, reading ‘Sandbag Dam’ in one breath, then sitting in silence, crying my eyes out. It was like one of those all-consuming loves that completely overwhelm you. The feeling was overpowering and clear – I had to make this film. Ankica was right. In general, working with young people is something I really connect with, and since I believe that there is a lack of films that focus on young people, I am very happy that we can now offer them a film like this.

A small town holds the potential for great disaster. How crucial was it to set the love story of two young men in ‘Sandbag Dam’ against the backdrop of a close-knit community where everyone knows each other?

It was important, but not essential. On one hand, the pressure in a small town is much greater for the characters. Secrets are harder to keep, and the road to public shaming is both quicker and more inevitable. This reality partially explains the actions of the protagonists’ parents. On the other hand, stories like this take place everywhere, and could just as easily be transposed to a larger city or a different country. During the development phase, as we met with potential partners at the WEMW Co-Production Forum, many of them recognized the truth of this story. The fact is, we tend to live in our own bubbles and assume that tolerance, acceptance of others’ choices, and openness are universal. Unfortunately, in reality, this is rarely the case.

How was it to collaborate with the screenwriter, renowned Croatian playwright Tomislav Zajec?

What drew me most strongly to the project was the way Tomislav shaped and portrayed the characters. They all feel incredibly real and alive. As viewers, we find ourselves able to empathize with each of them. And if we approach the story’s ‘villains’ – for lack of a better word – with an open

mind, we can see that they are ultimately acting out of fear. They simply don’t know any better or any different. Indeed, when fear takes over, especially the fear of the unknown, there’s little room left for compassion. When I joined the project, the screenplay was already finished and working flawlessly. Ankica and I used to joke, ‘We could start shooting tomorrow, if only we had the funding.’ But since the financing didn’t come through as quickly as we hoped, a few years passed, and by the time funds finally arrived, certain elements of the script had simply stopped functioning. This became clear during rehearsals with the young actors, and we realized that the script needed some adjustments to better connect with a younger audience. Working with Tomislav Zajec was truly wonderful. He is not only a brilliant writer, but also a wonderful person. We communicated openly and transparently about all the changes, and it was very important to me that, in the end, he was happy with the film. A screenplay is a living organism, naturally evolving and transforming through different stages of the creative process. It’s vital that these transformations are supported, both by the writer and by the entire team.



SANDBAG DAM



SANDBAG DAM

In the film, you draw a parallel between the impending flood caused by the swollen river and the flood of emotions that Marko experiences. Was this connection inscribed into the film's concept, or did it develop during the process of working on the story?

From the outset, Tomislav treated nature as a vibrant, tangible force, almost as a character in its own right. The ever-present threat of the flood mirrored the emotional turmoil experienced by Slaven and Marko. As the focus of the story shifted more towards Marko, it naturally followed that the river's imagery would represent his psychological and emotional state. Dramatically, these river shots also serve to foreshadow the next phase of the narrative. If you listen closely to the radio reports about the approaching floods, which are heard on three separate occasions, you'll notice that, through these reports, we are also telling the story of Marko and Slaven. In other words, the natural disasters and fluctuations, are deeply intertwined with the characters' emotional experiences.

How many sandbags did you use to create the sandbag dam? Was this the biggest production challenge?

The large sandbag dam featured in the film is located in the settlement of Brodarci, and it is the last of its kind in Croatia. Constructing a dam like that would have been impossible

under typical Croatian production conditions. During the preparation phase, we learned of plans to demolish it and replace it with a more efficient flood defense system. So, in a twist of fate, the longest sandbag dam – at the height of its 'career' – became a film star. We built smaller sandbag dams and barriers around the houses ourselves, relocating them as needed from one filming location to another within the village. One of the more significant challenges we faced was the river itself. The water levels changed daily, and we had to adjust scenes based on what nature presented us with each day. Unexpectedly, one of the most difficult scenes to shoot involved a dog barking. Over the course of the filming, the dog had become so accustomed to our presence that he would just wag his tail when he saw us. Filming this scene turned out to be a real challenge. When working with a tight budget, it's crucial to have collaborators who are genuinely invested in the film. I must give special recognition to our executive producer Hrvoje Pervan, who had an exceptionally demanding task, as well as to set designer Tajana Čanić Stanković and costume designer Selena Orb, both of whom demonstrated great passion for the project from the very first reading of the script. Additionally, one of my most invaluable collaborators were assistant director and Kinorama producer, Dragan Jurić and cinematographer Marko Brdar. Even after the shoot, there were many challenges. With strict deadlines in place, the editing process and overall post-production had to be tightly scheduled, allowing us little room

for flexibility. We had to work fast. In this race against time, editor Slaven Zečević, with whom I had previously collaborated, and sound designer Julij Zornik, played key roles. It's always a great feeling when, after finishing a film, you find yourself eager to work with your 'comrades-in-arms' again on the next project.

'Sandbag Dam' was primarily shot with a handheld camera, employing close-up and tightly framed, almost claustrophobic shots to convey the protagonists' inner turmoil. How did you and director of photography Marko Brdar decide on this approach?

From the very beginning, I felt that the film demanded two things: a handheld camera and an almost constant proximity to the main characters. I have always greatly admired Marko's work, and his unique sensibility and style were exactly what our film needed. We spent a lot of time discussing the script and analyzing each scene. In the final stages of preparation, Marko was present at most of the actors' rehearsals, which proved to be invaluable. His contribution was immense.



SAIBRAE DAMI

What was it about the lead actors, Lav Novosel and Andrija Žunac, that convinced you to cast them in such emotionally complex roles upon which the entire film rests?

I found the entire audition process quite fascinating; and it reaffirmed for me the importance and necessity of making a film like this. I opened a call for young actors, and around three hundred candidates applied. Before the auditions began, I held group Zoom meetings where I introduced the film's themes and content, and I made it clear that anyone could withdraw if they felt uncomfortable. Some young people, both girls and boys, chose to step back immediately, which further underscored the significance of telling this story. Intuition is key to my decision-making process. I need to 'fall in love' with an actor in a very particular way, and I must feel that we can communicate openly and push boundaries together through our work. Andrija Žunac quickly became 'my' Slaven – there was no contest. He possesses a charming sense of rebelliousness and openness, and his eyes are incredibly expressive. It took me longer to find the right actor to portray Marko. Lav hadn't initially auditioned due to a rule at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb, which prohibits first- and second-year students from participating in film projects outside of Academy productions. This meant we had to schedule our shoot for a time when they had no classes. Like Andrija, Lav was in his first year and wanted to stay focused on his studies. However, life can often take unexpected

turns – I spotted Lav in the audience at a theater performance, and the moment I saw him, I instinctively felt he should be Marko. I invited him to audition, and he proved to be the perfect choice. From the outset, Andrija and Lav had wonderful chemistry. They were already classmates and knew each other well, which proved to be a great advantage. Throughout the seven-month rehearsal process, we built mutual trust and prepared thoroughly. This preparation phase was crucial in achieving a successful result.

Did you start considering the actors for the parent roles only after casting the young actors, or was it a simultaneous process?

The young actors were cast first, followed by the adults. This felt like the logical order. I first noticed Tanja Smoje many years ago while assisting on Zvonimir Jurić's 'The Reaper'. Although she had a very small role, she was incredibly captivating, and I knew she was someone I wanted to work with; it was just a matter of time and the right opportunity – which came ten years later. So, Tanja was the first person I offered a role to among the adult cast. She plays Marko's mother, Vanča. For the role of Slaven's mother, Alenka, I initially considered actresses in their late 40s; for some reason, I had a fixation on that age group. However, during one of the rehearsals, Andrija just blurted, 'I want Alma Prica to play my mom,' and it felt so right that no other actress made sense. Fortunately, Alma, whom I greatly respect and adore, agreed.

Marko's father, an extremely important role in the film, was brilliantly portrayed by Filip Šovagović, who joined our team last but fit in perfectly. All three of these seasoned actors wholeheartedly supported Lav and Andrija, which was immensely important for the young actors.

What was it like to work with Leon Grgić, who plays Marko's brother, Fičo?

Working with a child with Down syndrome is as demanding as working with any other child. You won't achieve good results without proper preparation before filming. And during the actual shoot, it's crucial to ensure that you capture everything you need before the child loses focus or concentration. Once a child gets tired or bored, it becomes much harder to motivate them to continue filming. A fortunate circumstance was that Leon clicked with Lav from the moment they met, and together they built a wonderful, natural relationship that is palpable on screen. Leon was a great inspiration to all of us. His authenticity constantly brought us back to the present moment, and we all felt enriched by the experience of working with him. He also proved to be an excellent actor, without whom the film would not have been the same.



SANDBAG DAM

The film was a co-production between production companies from Croatia, Slovenia, and Lithuania. From the director's perspective, was this a challenge or an advantage?

From the director's perspective, it is definitely an advantage when your first choice comes from a country that is also a co-producer; I consider this a perfect match. This was the case with Marko Brdar, a Slovenian director of photography, whom I would have chosen for this film regardless of his nationality. I must admit that I was initially apprehensive about the composer, who, in our case, was from Lithuania. A composer is a very important partner in your film, and since I didn't know them, it was impossible to predict how the collaborative process would unfold. One of the key aspects of this process is the intangible element – the alignment of sensibilities and the composer's ability to understand the often unspoken language of the director, which, in this case, was mine. Our Lithuanian co-producer, Ieva, provided a list of suggestions, and Domas Strupinskas was the one whose work resonated most with me. This turned out to be, to mine and everyone's satisfaction, one of the most beautiful and significant collaborations of my career so far. Co-productions have become extremely important to Croatian cinema, and since our producer Ankica has always believed that this film would resonate well in markets beyond our own, she selected co-producers who recognized both its beauty and significance. Aleš and Ieva

were extremely enthusiastic about the project and provided vital support throughout the entire process. When we presented 'Sandbag Dam' in the Industry program at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival as a work-in-progress, the reactions from participants and the interest in our film testified to its international potential, which we find tremendously exciting. It was there that our international sales agent, Cosimo Santoro, joined the team.

In Croatian cinema, there have so far been only a handful of films focusing on same-sex love. Do you think this will change?

I've noticed that the new generation of filmmakers is increasingly exploring the theme of same-sex love in their short films. I believe this trend will eventually lead to feature films on the same subject – and I hope they will be outstanding.



LONG CONNECTIONS

ČEJEN ČERNIĆ ČANAK

Čejen Černić Čanak graduated in Film and TV Direction from the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb. After directing numerous short fiction, documentary, and animated films, she made her feature debut with the youth film 'The Mystery of Green Hill' ('Uzbuna na Zelenom Vrhu'), adapted from Ivan Kušan's novel by Hana Jušić. This project earned her the Golden Birch Award for Best Debuting Director at the Pula Film Festival. The film became a box office hit, screening at over 25 festivals and being sold to multiple countries, including the USA, Canada, China, Germany, Austria, and Malaysia. 'Sandbag Dam' ('Zečji nasip'), with a screenplay by Tomislav Zajec, is her second feature film.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2025 Zečji nasip / Sandbag Dam
feature film, 88 min
- 2022 Majmunska posla / Monkey Business,
short film, 15 min
- 2020 Skretanje / Lurch
short fiction film, 16 min (co-directed with Jasna Nanut
and Judita Gamulin)
- 2019 Zeko / Bunny Situation
short film, 15 min
- 2017 Uzbuna na Zelenom Vrhu / The Mystery of Green Hill
feature film, 81 min
- 2013 Cura koja je voljela bajke / The Girl Who Loved Fairy-Tales
short animated film, 4 min



TOMISLAV ZAJEC

Was born in 1972 in Zagreb, where he earned his degree in dramaturgy from the Academy of Dramatic Art. He currently holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Dramaturgy at the Academy and also conducts drama and screenwriting workshops in both Zagreb and Split. An accomplished playwright, Zajec has authored twelve original dramatic works that have been staged in Croatia and abroad. His plays have been performed in Zagreb, Split, Varaždin, Dubrovnik, Ljubljana, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Novi Sad, London, Buenos Aires, Trieste, Warsaw, Glasgow, Bradford, Norwich, Bucharest, Braila, and Ipswich. In addition to playwrighting, Zajec writes novels, poetry, and screenplays, and is the author of numerous adaptations and dramatizations for the stage. In 2012, he published 'The Rules of the Game', a manual on dramatic writing. His works have been featured in several Croatian and international anthologies of prose, poetry, and drama. His play 'Someone Should Walk the Dog' was awarded the Grand Prix at the 29th Journées de Lyon des Autrices et Auteurs de Théâtre in 2018. Zajec is a six-time recipient of the Marin Držić Award for Drama, a two-time winner of the Marul Award at the Marulić Days Croatian Drama Festival, along with other honors for his literary, screenwriting, and dramaturgical works.



LAV NOVOSEL

Lav Novosel was born in 2002 in Zagreb. From an early age, he attended the drama studio at the Zagreb Youth Theatre (ZKM) and studied piano at the Elly Bašić Music School. He made his stage debut in 2018 in 'The Paul Street Boys' ('Junaci Pavlove ulice'), directed by Lea Anastazija Fleger. In 2021, he played the role of the Spartan ambassador in Manfred Schweigkofler's 'Lysistrata'. His feature film debut came in 2023 with 'Hotel Pula', directed by Andrej Korovljev. He has also appeared in several short student films. Beyond acting, his passions include music – singing, and playing the piano and guitar. He continues to hone his skills through acting and music workshops. Since 2022, he has voiced characters for international animated and live-action projects. He enrolled in the Acting program at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb in 2022, where he is currently a third-year student. His role as Marko in 'Sandbag Dam' ('Zečji nasip'), directed by Čejen Černić Čanak, is his first lead role in a feature film.



ANDRIJA ŽUNAC

Andrija Žunac was born in 2001 in Zagreb. He describes himself as a grandson, son, brother, and a bit of an introvert. Aside from acting, he is passionate about music and sports. As a child, he appeared in short films and has continued acting as a student. He has played leading roles in two short films produced by Croatian Radiotelevision in collaboration with the EBU, and has lent his voice to various animated films and series. Andrija made his theatrical debut in 2015, playing the lead role of Emil in the production of 'Emil and the Detectives', directed by Milan Trenc. His feature film debut came with 'Good Times, Bad Times' ('Pamtim samo sretne dane'), directed by Nevio Marasović, which premiered at the Pula Film Festival in 2023. He has been studying acting at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb since 2022 and is currently in his final year. In 'Sandbag Dam' ('Zečji nasip'), directed by Čejen Černić Čanak, he portrays the character of Slaven.

CAST

CAST

Marko: Lav Novosel
Slaven: Andrija Žunac
Fićo: Leon Grgić
Petra: Franka Mikolaci
Vanča: Tanja Smoje
Alenka: Alma Prica
Franjo: Filip Šovagović
Ivan: Luka Baškarad

CREW

Director
Screenwriter
Producers
Co-producers
Associate producers
Director of Photography
Editor
Composer
Art Director
Costume Designer
Sound Designer

Čejen Černić Čanak
Tomislav Zajec
Ankica Jurić Tilić, Hrvoje Pervan, Dragan Jurić
Ieva Norvilienė, Aleš Pavlin, Andrej Štritof
Marija Stojanović, Milan Stojanović,
Maja Popović Milojević, Marija Dimitrova
Marko Brdar
Slaven Zečević
Domas Strupinskas
Tajana Čanić Stanković
Selena Orb
Julij Zornik

Production Kinorama (Croatia), Tremora (Lithuania),
Perfo Production (Slovenia)
Supported by Croatian Audiovisual Center, Lithuanian Film
Centre, Slovenian Film Centre, Viba Film Studio,
Creative Europe – Media, HRT

KINORAMA

Kinorama is a production company founded in 2003 and based in Zagreb, Croatia. Kinorama's filmography includes 40 feature-length films, most of them co-productions, several TV series, and a number of shorts. Kinorama's films were screened and awarded at prestigious festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Karlovy Vary, Toronto. In 2019, Kinorama's producer Ankica Jurić Tilić was awarded Eurimages Co-production Award at EFA ceremony in Berlin. Our production company works with just as many very young authors as with the established ones. Many of our films are made by first-time directors, and we are proud to have recognized their potential.

SANDBAG DAM



88'
© KINORAMA, TREMORA, PERFO PRODUCTION
Croatia-Lithuania-Slovenia 2025.

CONTACT PRODUCTION
Kinorama – Ankica Jurić Tilić
Bogoslava Šuleka 29,
Zagreb, Croatia
ankica@kinorama.hr
+385 98465576
www.kinorama.hr

CONTACT INTERNATIONAL SALES
THE OPEN REEL – Cosimo Santoro
Piazza Vittorio Emanuele 3 74016
Massafra (Ta) Italy
cs@theopenreel.com
+39 340 494 0351
www.theopenreel.com

CONTACT INTERNATIONAL PRESS
MADAVENUE PR – Eva Herrero
eva@madavenue.es
+34 649 70 68 07
Luca di Leonardo
lucadileonardo@gmail.com
+34 693 68 95 63

CONTACT CROATIAN PRESS
MADISON CONSULTING – Josip Jurčić
josip.jurcic@madison.hr
+385 99 313 4854