

BETA CINEMA
presents a VOLTE production
in co-production with ICI ET LÀ PRODUCTIONS, TRAMAL FILMS,
and BR ARTE, RTV Slovenia

NOT A WORD

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
HANNA SLAK

STARRING
Maren Eggert // Jona Levin Nicolai // Maryam Zaree // Juliane Siebecke
Marko Mandić // Mehdi Nebbou

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LOGLINE

Nina leads a structured life, pursuing an ambitious artistic career. When her teenage son Lars has a strange accident at school, she decides to take a break from city life and together they head to their vacation home on the rugged Atlantic coast. Bound in silence, their already brittle relationship is pushed to the edge.

SYNOPSIS

When Nina finds out that her teenage son Lars has been injured in an accident at school, she is faced with a dilemma: Can she leave behind the rehearsals with her orchestra in order to be there completely for him...in a situation that could be a life-changing moment? The decision she makes is a compromise: for five days, she will leave Munich to take Lars on a getaway, to the island in western France where they usually spend their summer vacation – a place full of fond memories and significance to Lars.

In winter, however, the island is no vacation paradise, but windy, dark and cold. In the small house on the beach, mother and son are forced to face each other. Thoughts of music haunt Nina, the calls from the mainland worry her. Is she just sabotaging her career, which she has fought so hard for...and for what? Lars withdraws further every day. Misunderstandings multiply, suppositions turn into suspicions: Was Lars a witness to a gruesome crime at school? Did he even participate in it? When a winter storm cuts the last connection to the mainland, a dangerous confrontation ensues.

INTERVIEW WITH HANNA SLAK

How did you come up with the idea for "Not a Word", was there a personal motivation?

"Not a Word" was born from a moment of observation in my neighborhood in Berlin. We lived across from a school, there was a small shop on the corner, outside of which newspaper panels would stand with the most awful things printed in bold at the eye-level of a six-year-old just starting to read. Once, there was a case of a schoolgirl who was murdered. Most of the kids would not pay attention to the news headlines, but some did, and were shocked. Did they manage to find a way to talk about it? Or was the message from the adults to pretend it had never happened, and just move on with their lives? What kind of scars did this leave them with?

In my work, I come back again and again to the question of consequences of violence. Not the act of violence in itself, but the consequences it may have for those who are not even directly affected, who are perhaps far removed, but still suffer from the impact. Whenever violence breaks into our world, it leaves an imprint, a wound, a scar. This creates a need to talk, to heal. But where can a healing process start?

What can you tell us about the script development process?

To tell the story of protagonists silently haunted by a trauma resulting from a violent death of a child, I decided to transpose Mahler's Fifth Symphony into a narrative story. Child death was a recurring event in Mahler's life, as he witnessed six of his siblings dying during infancy and lost one of his own children. He would repeatedly deal with it in his work. My idea was to use his artistic wisdom and follow his musical narrative through the emotional darkness, the despair, towards the love and the light. The Fifth Symphony starts with a stiff and pompous Funeral

March. The stiffness falls apart, the music passes through anger, neurosis, despair, surrender...towards the affirmation of life in Rondo Finale, perhaps the most joyful and liberating piece of Mahler's music. That is my reading of the Symphony; there are of course many others. I would analyze the musical narrative and identify storytelling elements to construct the film story. The story follows the narrative of the music, but it relates to the music in different ways, depending on the emotional charge of the moment, and the state of mind of the protagonists.

Tell us about how you casted the film.

I worked with Ulrike Müller, a very experienced and talented German Casting Director. Ulrike has a great intuition when it comes to seeing through the director's eyes. We were both fans of Maren Eggert's work in film and theater. Maren is an exceptional actress. She has the rare ability to transform into many very different personalities, and still she retains something untouchable, a mystery she brings along and gives to her characters. She can be sweet or horrible, tragic, beautiful, appalling - and truly funny as well. I love the ambivalence and the humor she carries. To find her counterpart, the child for the role of Lars, we went through several rounds of casting. The first thing that I noticed about Jona Levin Nicolai was his voice. He is very supple and sensitive in his acting. It was easy and fun to work with him, despite the difficulty of the role.

What was the visual concept for the film?

Claire Mathon, the cinematographer of "Not a Word", is known as an incredibly talented artist. Claire is the most supportive and open-minded collaborator. We talked a lot about colors, rhythm, movement, we discussed the films we love, the paintings we admire, and we listened to music. Our

aim was to create a contrast between the controlled, organized space of the city, where Nina and Lars come from, and the uncontrollable, raw power of nature – wind, ocean, light – on the winter island they travel to. This corresponds to the emotional narrative of the story, the change that the protagonists undergo – letting go of control, surrendering to the power of life.

Nina is a successful musician. Could she also have been a senior politician, or a CEO or judge?

It was important that Nina is a successful professional in a position of power, coming from a profession of monologue, within our society of monologues, lacking in dialogue. And it was important that she is a single parent, which again puts her in an uncanny position of power, of somebody who is entitled to make decisions for others. The choice of Nina's profession was natural because of the theme of the story – the ability (or inability) to listen, to hear – to truly engage in a dialogue. I also wanted to convey how a certain development, a learning process we go through in our intimate relationships, impacts our development as professionals, whatever our profession might be. It was interesting to connect the difficulties Nina is having as a parent to the difficulties she is having as a musician, and thus create a certain intimacy and complexity in her relationship with music as well.

She also is a single mum. Would you wish for different or more support for single parents in her situation?

I have been a single parent during a period in my life, and some of the people I admire most are single parents. There is definitely not enough understanding of the incredible wisdom, determination and energy these people contribute to the society. Those are the parents who raise their voices first when they notice injustice, a reform that needs to be implemented at

school or in the society... They know the true importance of solidarity and sharing. If we would finally be able to create a more supportive environment for single parents and their children – who, at least in Germany, are still facing systemic discrimination when it comes to their basic rights – it is not only necessary, we would all gain from it.

The life of an artist can be very demanding at times, how does that fit with parenting, in your opinion?

There is a certain narrative in the public that I have been observing for years – that it is impossible to accommodate parenting and a successful career, especially in the domain of arts. I wanted to create a different thought – that it might in fact be impossible to be a successful professional, especially in the domain of arts, without having lived through intimate, significant attachments, be it through parenting, or any other caregiving relationship. It is the ups and downs, the dramas, tragedies and joys of those long-term relationships that are an inspiration and source of wisdom and growth. Mahler's music as we know it would not exist without the life he had lived with his family. I wanted to create a story about a character who, if she succeeds to resolve her issues as a parent, could have a chance to become a better artist as well. I, myself, come from a family of artists – both my parents were filmmakers – so I have seen both sides, I have been a child of artists, and I am an artist who is also a parent. And my experience is that there isn't a clear border. It is all life, flowing into one another, growing and developing through one another. Sometimes we learn from our work how to resolve problems we face as parents. Sometimes we learn from parenting how to be better at work.

What role does the shopkeeper play on the island, does Nina recognize something in her that she longs for?

On the island, our protagonists meet another family. The differences between the two families expose the blind spots in the relationship between Nina and Lars, and they expose them as the city dwellers they are, unaccustomed to the life on the island. The teenage girl, Guen, is about the same age as Lars and as the schoolgirl who'd been murdered. At first, she seems fragile and vulnerable; we fear that Lars might be a threat to her. But it is the ease with which Guen expresses her feelings and her thoughts that initiates a long overdue process of self-examination in Lars, which sets things dangerously in motion between him and Nina.

What can you tell us about the role of nature in the film: the wind, the sea, and the huge storm?

Nature has a strong voice in Mahler's music, the unpredictable, changing character of the weather in the Alps is reflected in the briskness of his musical language. In the film, we wanted to give the nature on the island a voice of its own. In winter, the weather conditions on the Atlantic coast are unstable, which can be a nightmare when shooting a film. But actually, we did not want to control the circumstances, we were interested in showing the unpredictable, uncontrollable character of nature. We were ready to adjust and to improvise, to be flexible in our thinking and light enough in our equipment to be able to follow nature's lead. This concept was a risky adventure and required a lot of trust from our producer, Michel Balagué. But we are experienced filmmakers and we had a highly experienced and motivated crew, a real "outdoor crew" (many of our crew members used to work on difficult sets in the Alps). Our shooting schedule was based on the times of the tides, the phases of the moon, the currents and the wind, and local fishermen wisdom.

We were facing challenges like the constant movement of the ocean, wind and

weather conditions. As an example, there is a scene just after the storm, a painful moment in the story. We imagined the weather to be grim, dark, windy. But on the shooting day, we suddenly had blue skies, no wind, and sunshine. We had about 20 minutes to change the concept. We decided that it is the burning light of the winter sun what hurts in the scene. We changed the concept of lightning, the framing, adjusted the acting, we were ready to shoot. On another occasion, there was suddenly dense fog on our location on top of the cliffs. We adopted the framing and the rhythm to integrate the beauty of the foggy landscape in the storytelling of this particular scene. We had to be very fast in our thinking and in executing our thoughts. But the most beautiful moments and most moving scenes in the film came about this way.

Did the storm happen in reality and how did you plan these shooting days?

We planned the two days to shoot the storm meticulously, following the diagrams of weather stations, advice of experts and of local fishermen. It was supposed to be two days of the biggest waves, strongest wind, and highest tide. But the reality was different. The highest tide was there, we were able to create the wind, but the ocean was strangely calm, like it was holding its breath. We have never seen it so calm before. It was beautiful. There was something eerie in the air. So we changed the concept of the storm to allow this eerie atmosphere into the story. With the support of our CGI crew, the clever work of the editor Bettina Böhler, and the composer Amélie Legrand, we were able to create one of the most beautiful and intense scenes in the film.

Apart from Mahler, there is also original music in the film. How did you work with the composer?

The Fifth Symphony appears five times in the film - once for each movement, as the

story progresses through its own narrative movements. What we wanted to create in addition was a feeling that, even when we don't hear it, the Symphony kept continuing, that it was always there, playing in the background of Nina's thoughts, that the music was in fact influencing and changing the story. Amélie identified singular musical ideas from each movement and reconstructed them into simple, recurring thoughts, echoes, memories. It was like a regression, a search for the first sounds, songs, voices, that later converged into the Symphony.

The soundscape of the film seems to play an important role as well.

Musical thought is born from our encounters with nature. The idea was to connect the music in the film with the voice of nature, connecting the music with the

sounds of the island: wind, ocean, birds. "Not a Word" is a film about learning to listen again, to listen to music, to people, but also to nature. From the very beginning we were very conscientious about the sound design in the film. On set, we worked with a wonderful Slovenian sound recordist, Grega Švabič, who is very experienced in extreme weather conditions. And we had the best possible German post-production team: the legendary re-recording mixer Martin Steier, and sound designers Noemi Hampel and Gabor Ripli. It was the sensitivity of those amazing professionals that allowed us to create a magical, multi-layered soundscape. The audience definitely has something to listen forward to.

PRODUCTION NOTES BY MICHEL BALAGUÉ

When Hanna Slak came to me with her fourth feature film project, "Not a Word", I immediately wanted to continue our long-standing professional relationship and take it to the next level, where I would be responsible as lead producer for the first time.

The multi-layered story of a mother and her son, Hanna Slak's powerful visual language and aesthetic sensibility, her admirable ability to shape sound and music into an emotional experience - all these aspects convinced me as producer of "Not a Word" and made me very enthusiastic about the project.

Actress Maren Eggert ("I Was At Home, But"; winner of the Silver Bear at Berlinale 2021 for her lead role in the award-winning "I'm Your Man") and Jona Levin Nicolai gave an extraordinary performance as the mother/son duo of NINA and LARS and were joined by Maryam Zaree ("Undine", "Transit"), renowned Slovenian actor Marko Mandić and French actor Mehdi Nebbou.

It was clear from the very beginning that the film would become a European co-production, and after a very positive response at the Atelier de la Cinéfondation in Cannes and the When East Meet West co-production market, we began working with Christophe Bruncher of Ici et Là Productions (FR) and Miha Cernec of Tramal Films (SL), as well as commissioning editors Nina John and Carlos Gerstenhauer of Bayerischer Rundfunk and Barbara Häbe of Arte.

Together, we have put together an internationally acclaimed artistic team: director of photography Claire Mathon ("Portrait of a Lady on Fire", "Atlantics"), winner of the French Academy Award (César) 2020 for "Best Cinematography"; set designer K.D. Gruber ("Barbara", "Transit"), editor Bettina Böhler ("Undine", "Transit"), well known for their work in German arthouse projects; Franco-German composer Amélie Legrand ("The Miner") and casting director Ulrike Müller have also joined us for this ambitious project.

Given the availability of our main actress, our DoP and the cinematic effect we were aiming for - we're talking storms, hostile nature and a deserted island - we began shooting on 19 January 2022 on the island of Belle-Ile in France, followed by the second half of shooting in April in Munich and Zagreb. This was followed by extensive post-production with fantastic VFX partners and an incredible post-production team, so that we could produce a strong, gripping and emotionally moving independent film.

We're thrilled to be premiering it in the Platform competition at the Toronto International Film Festival and can't wait to share it with audiences all over the world.

THE CAST

MAREN EGGERT as NINA PALČECK

Maren Eggert is a Berlin-based actress, internationally best known for her stellar performance as the archaeologist Alma in Maria Schrader's break-out hit "I'm your Man" (2021), which was shortlisted for the Academy Award for the Best International Feature Film. The film had premiered in Competition at the 71st Berlinale 2021, earning Maren Eggert the Silver Bear for the Best Actress. Eggert also played leading roles in Angela Schanelec's award-winning Berlinale Competition entry "I was Home, but..." (2018), in "Marseille" (Angela Schanelec/2009), which premiered in Un Certain Regard in Cannes and "Die Frau am Ende der Straße" (Claudia Garde/2007), which brought her the trophy for the Best Actress at the German Critics' Awards in 2008. She also acted in "The Experiment" (Oliver Hirschbiegel/2001) and "The Pharmacist" (Rainer Kaufmann/1997). Apart from numerous appearances in German primetime TV, she also has been a permanent ensemble member at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin since 2009.

JONA LEVIN NICOLAI as LARS

Jona Levin Nicolai was born in 2004 and lives in Berlin. After various theater productions and short films he was casted for the international TV series "The Net" (2022). Within the last year he played in various German TV films and series and this year also in "The Grimm Reality" (Netflix). His performance as Lars in "Not a Word" is his first leading role in a theatrical film.

MARYAM ZAREE as BARBAN

Maryam Zaree is a multi-award-winning actress living in Berlin. She played one of the female leads in the award-winning crime series "4 Blocks" and took on roles in "System Crasher" (Nora Fingscheidt/2019), "Transit" (2018) and "Undine" (2020) (Christian Petzold), "I am not with him" (Tayfun Pirselimoglu/2012), "Burnout" (Verena Freytag/2011), "Shahada" (Burhan Qurbani/2010) and "Skin Deep" (Alex Schaad), which premiered in Venice's Critics Week in 2022. She is a guest actress at various renowned German theatres. On German television, she can be seen in the continuous role of forensic doctor Nasrin Reza in the Berlin Tatort series, one of Germany's most popular prime-time programs.

JULIANE SIEBECKE as GUENOLA

Juliane was born in 2003 in Berlin. It had long been her wish to become an actress. In 2021, during her last year at school, she was asked on the street if she would like to do a casting for the role of Guenola in "Not a Word". After this first shooting she developed her acting skills further and played the leading role Emma in "Herzstolpern", a 2 x 90 min prime-time tv movie for the German national tv channel ZDF. And she has taken on a guest role in the play "Donna Rosita" at the RambaZamba Theatre in Berlin.

MARKO MANDIĆ as JULIJAN

Marko Mandić studied acting in Ljubljana and New York. He is a permanent member of the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana since 1998, where he is known for his portrayals of Hamlet, Caligula, Platonov, Roberto Zucco, Hector, Macbeth, Jerman, Astrov and many others. A substantial part of his career is associated with directors Ivica Buljan and Bojan Jablanovec as well as with the independent contemporary performing arts company Via Negativa, where he developed among the other projects Mandić Trilogy and in 2022 diptych MandićCircus.

Mandić is a recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including the Prešeren Fund Award, several Borštnik Awards, the European Shooting Stars Award at the 57th Berlinale and the Best Actor Award at the Alexandria Film Festival for his role in Vinko Möderndorfer's "Inferno". He is also known for his roles in Möderndorfer's "Landscape No.2", Miran Zupanič's "Rascals", Janja Glogovac's "L ... Like Love", Dominik Graf's series "In the Face of Crime", Stefan Westerwelle's "Lose Your Head", Thomas Arslan's "Gold", Damjan Kozole's "Nightlife", Leonel Dietsche's "The New End", Patrick Hughes' "The Hitman's Bodyguard", Xaver Böhm's "O Beautiful Night", Dalibor Matanić's "The Dawn" and "The Last Socialist Artefact", Ema Kugler's "For the End of Time", "Echoes of Time", "Man with Shadow" and Sonja Prosenč's series "Trigrad". Marko Mandić previously worked with Hanna Slak on "Teah" and "Some Other Stories" (Heaven).

MEHDI NEBBOU as ALEX GOFF

Mehdi Nebbou is a French actor with German and Algerian roots. Fluent in French, English, German and Italian, but also proficient in Spanish and Arabic, he has enjoyed an international career in France, Germany, the United States, India, and Italy. He has starred in blockbusters such as Steven Spielberg's "Munich" (2005); emotional dramas such as "Folgeschäden" by Samir Nasr (2004), in the social drama "The Fixer" (2016) by Romanian director Adrian Sitaru, which was the official entry for the 2017 Oscars as Best Foreign Film, or in the series "Homeland" (2011), "The Bureau" (2015), "Deutschland 86" (2018), "Baby" (2018) or "The Last Word" (2020). He also appeared in comedies such as "CA\$H" (2008) by Éric Besnard with Jean Dujardin and Jean Reno or in the German TV series "Mann/Frau" (2016).

THE CREW

HANNA SLAK – DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER

Hanna Slak is a film director and script writer who moves between several narrative languages. She has written and directed feature films for the big screen (“Blind Spot”, 2002; “Teah”, 2007; “The Miner”, 2017) but also documentaries and experimental shorts. Her films were screened at festivals such as Berlinale, Rotterdam, Locarno, Warsaw, and others. “The Miner” was the Slovenian entry for the Best International Film at the Academy Awards 2018. “Not a Word” is Slak’s fourth cinema feature and her first German language film. Slak lives in Berlin with her partner and her children, aged 6 and 16.

Filmography (feature films, directed by Hanna Slak)

2023 // Kein Wort (Not a Word)

2017 // Rudar (The Miner)

2009 // Some Other Stories - one episode of episode film

2007 // Tea (Teah)

2002 // Slepa pega (Blind Spot)

2001 // Desperado Tonic - one episode of episode film

Awards (selection)

Best Director & Best Actor & Best Editing at the Slovene Film Festival for “The Miner”

Best Film at the Trieste Film Festival for “The Miner”

Best Feature at the Tuzla Film Festival for “The Miner”

Best Cinematography at the South East European Film Festival in LA for “The Miner”

Silver Berlin Bear for Short Film for the experimental documentary “Laborat” directed by Guillaume Cailleau (written, edited and produced by Hanna Slak)

Best Director at the Sofia Film Festival for “Blind Spot”

Best Actress Award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival for “Blind Spot”

Don Quijote Prize at the Cottbus Film Festival for “Blind Spot”

Best Cinematography, Best Sound and Critics' Award for Best Film at the Slovene Film Festival for “Teah”

CLAIRE MATHON – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Claire Mathon is an experienced French cinematographer and winner of the 2020 French Academy Awards (César) for Best Cinematography. She is a graduate of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière and since graduating in 1998, she has collaborated with many renowned directors such as Maïwenn (“All About Actresses”, “Polisse”, “My King”), Alain Guiraudie (“Stranger by the Lake”, “Staying Vertical”), Louis Garrel (“Two Friends”), Mati Diop (“Atlantics”) or Céline Sciamma (“Portrait of a Lady on Fire”). She is also a regular lecturer at international film schools.

BETTINA BÖHLER – EDITOR

Bettina Böhler is a Berlin-based editor. Since 1985, she has worked with various renowned German directors such as Christian Petzold, Christoph Schlingensief, Oskar Roehler and Angelina Maccarone. Up to now, she has edited more than 50 feature films, documentaries and television films. Many of these works have been shown at the international film festivals in Cannes, Venice and Berlin, winning numerous awards. In 2007 she was awarded the Bremen Film Prize for her longstanding services to European film. In 2012, she was nominated for the German Film Award for her collaboration with Christian Petzold on “Barbara”. Bettina Böhler was nominated again for the German Film Award in 2017 for her editing of Nicolette Krebitz’s Sundance premiere “Wild”. Her most recent credits include Christian Petzold’s “Afire” (2023), Nicolette Krebitz’s “AEIOU” (2022) and Christian Petzold’s “Undine” (2020).

K.D. GRUBER – PRODUCTION DESIGNER

K.D. Gruber is a well renowned production designer, that has worked for famous directors such as Christian Petzold (“Barbara”, 2011, “Phoenix” in 2013 or “Transit” in 2017, “Afire” in 2023) ; Jan Ole Gerster (“Lara”, 2019), Nick Baker-Montey (“The Final Journey”, 2017) or Claus Räfle (“The Invisibles”, 2017).

AMÉLIE LEGRAND – COMPOSER

Amélie Legrand is a prize-winning French cellist and composer who lives between Paris and Berlin. She works and collaborates in many different musical fields and styles such as noise rock, Arabic music, free improvisation and film music. In her compositions, she always strives to exploit the full potential of the cello and is on the lookout for new possibilities of expression. She has composed the soundtrack for feature films such as “The Miner” (Hanna Slak/2017), “In the Last Days of the City” (Tamer El Said/2016) and “A Tug of War” (Amil Shivji/2021).

MICHEL BALAGUÉ – PRODUCER

Michel Balagué lives and works between Berlin and Marseille where he runs the independent production companies VOLTE (DE) and VOLTE Film (FR). He produces and co-produces feature films, documentaries and artistic projects. Previous films include “The Miner” by Hanna Slak (Slovenian Oscar Entry - 25 Awards in international festivals); “In the Last Days of the City”, by Tamer El Said (Calligary Award in the 66th Berlinale, Best Director Award in Bafici, Best Film Award in Wroclaw and Les 3 Continents) that toured the film festivals around the world, garnered critical acclaim and was released in several territories, including the US, France and Germany; “Sieniawka” by Marcin Malaszcak (63rd Berlinale - first film prize at the FID Marseille), “My Love Awaits me by the Sea” by Mais Darwazah (TIFF 2013), “Face B” by Leila Albayaty (65th Berlinale) and “Felix in Wonderland” by Marie Losier (Locarno 2019). He also produced “One Hundred Steps” by Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, which premiered in the Short Film Competition at the Berlinale 2021, winning the German Short Film Award.

“Not a Word” is Balagué’s most recent production.

CREDITS // TECHNICAL DETAILS

Drama / 2023 / Germany, France, Slovenia / 87min

MAIN CAST

Nina Palčec	Maren Eggert
Lars	Jona Levin Nicolai
Barban	Maryam Zaree
Guenola	Juliane Siebecke
Julijan	Marko Mandić
Alex Goff	Mehdi Nebbou
Mrs. Gyami	Gina Haller
Yura	Yura Yang

MAIN CREW

Written and directed by	Hanna Slak
Director of Photography	Claire Mathon
Producer	Michel Balagué
Editor	Bettina Böhler
Composer	Amélie Legrand
SoundMix	Martin Steyer
Sound Design	Gabor Rippli, Noemi Hampel
Set Design	K.D. Gruber
Costume Design	Laura Schäffler
Make-Up	Tina Lasič Andrejević
Casting	Ulrike Müller
Special Effects	Unai Rosende, Jaume Capdevilla Rabell, Luka Umek
Production Company	VOLTE
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