

## MOVIES


# 'Beware of Children' ('Barn'): Film Review | Venice 2019

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Courtesy of Venice International Film Festival

## THE BOTTOM LINE

*A talky drama... but not only.* 

Norwegian novelist and director Dag Johan Haugerud's latest is a 160-minute exploration of guilt, grief and communication issues.

Norwegian novelist and filmmaker Dag Johan Haugerud likes a challenge. His 2014 film *I'm the One You Want* was a 53-minute, straight-to-camera monologue about a schoolteacher who fell in love with one of her 15-year-old students. His latest, *Beware of Children (Barn)*, which clocks in at two and a half hours, suggests he has plenty more to say about the world of education and its rules for both kids and the adults that teach and accompany them.

The new feature, which feels like a Norwegian, school-set variation on Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The Slap*, chronicles the fallout of the accidental — or was it? — death of a 13-year-old boy on a school soccer field for a large cast of characters, including the young culprit, her educators and the parents of both children involved. It premiered in Venice in the Giornate degli autori program before its premiere in Norwegian cinemas on Sept. 13.

There are several ways this project could be pitched, including calling it “a two-and-half-hour Norwegian yakfest about people feeling guilty and hiding their true intentions,” which might be true but wouldn't necessarily be the best way to sell this particular story. Yes, the feature is quite long but the cast of characters is also big and Haugerud's story needs time. The writer-director's very novelistic method involves looking at a situation from various angles — much like in *The Slap* — so that overlapping stories and their contradictions and omissions start to emerge. It is an adult-oriented narrative in which, despite quite a few shocking events and revelations, rarely a voice is raised, though this doesn't mean that it isn't chock-full of rollicking emotions. It's the kind of unassuming-looking drama that slowly seeps into your bones.

In the opening scene, we witness something on the soccer field of a school in a bourgeois suburb of Oslo. We can later put together that the incident involved 13-year-old Lykke (Ella Overbye) and her best friend, Jamie (Karl-Gustav A. Thommesen). The latter ends up in a hospital not much later, where he dies before his father, right-wing politician Per Erik (Thorbjorn Harr), can arrive.

To complicate matters, Per Erik is secretly dating the avowedly left-wing Liv (Henriette Steenstrup), who is the school principal and who thus needs to deal with the fallout of the occurrence for her students. Anders (Jan Gunnar Roise), who is Liv's brother, is a Norwegian teacher at the same institution and was supposed to be on the field when the accident happened, but he was talking to a newly arrived member of staff instead.

Around them, there are several more teachers as well as Anders' partner, the psychologist Jan (Brynjar Abel Bandlien), and the parents (Andrea Braein Hovig, Hans Olav Brenner) of Lykke, whose name means "happiness" in Norwegian, which invites quite a few sniggers. Did Lykke hit Jamie on purpose? What were they fighting about? Is Anders to blame for this? Or is Lykke? How will Liv do the right thing for the school and/or her brother when she's also secretly involved with the father of the victim?

Most film narratives would turn this into a mystery or moral thriller of sorts, but Haugerud has something else in mind. In scene after scene, he observes his characters as they discuss, quite respectfully, the same questions the audience will be pondering. But the pic doesn't take sides or offer any easy solutions. What interests the director isn't whether a 13-year-old girl is guilty of manslaughter or whether two adult siblings will survive at their place of employment because their positions are compromised. Instead, it is the defense mechanisms and the actions — or lack thereof — of the characters that become Haugerud's real subject. How do different people deal with things such as peer pressure and unexpected calamities? What happens when there's a clear conflict between people's innermost needs and emotions and the rules and frameworks that have been created for society in general and an educational institution in particular?

As the running time balloons into the triple digits, Haugerud calmly pushes forward and asks the viewer to compare how different characters behave in similar situations and how everyone needs to keep adjusting their positions based on tidbits of new information that keep surfacing. "I won't leave you. But when you're like this, I don't like you," one of the characters says to another. More than most films, *Beware of Children* — the original title just means "children" — knows that contradictions are part of human nature.

Since the film's mise-en-scene consists mainly of fixed interior shots and transitions shot outdoors in which the camera moves only slightly, it is up to the actors to really make the material come alive. Thankfully, they do so with gusto — if frequently sotto voce, always ensuring that a veneer of civility is present and that things never tip over into melodrama. Steenstrup, as the principal, is the pivot around which the entire story turns. She's the most complex character as she has feelings for a man whose political ideas she doesn't share but to whom she feels a certain loyalty — even as she is aware that it is her job as the principal to protect the school and its students first, while her familial loyalty would demand she protect her brother, too, though she isn't initially aware of the fact that he was absent. Steenstrup is magnificent in all her weariness, a lioness who doesn't necessarily even understand why she feels or does certain things but who feels and does them with conviction nonetheless.

Young Overbye also impresses. Her grief and mental processes become clear especially in her scenes with her favorite teacher, Anders, played to perfection by Roise as his own vat of contradictions and insecurities. As his boyfriend, former dancer Bandlien is equally great in a small role as the supportive partner who nonetheless might have his own ideas about things. Harr, who plays what could have been a right-wing caricature, instead uses Haugerund's dialogue to create a more complex character. Per Erik is a father raging with grief and a politician with clearly racist ideas but also a man who makes Liv happy and who can, if given some time, see the hurt and pain in others. A racist who loses a child might still be a racist, but he's also a father who lost a child. Indeed, everyone around us is more than one thing at any one time.

*Production companies: Motlys, Platform Produktion, Film I Vast*

*Cast: Henriette Steenstrup, Jan Gunnar Roise, Thorbjorn Harr, Brynjar Abel Bandlien, Anne Marit Jacobsen, Ella Overbye, Andrea Braein Hovig, Hans Olav Brenner, Tone Danielsen, Trine Wiggen, Selome Emnetu Adam Palsson, Audun Meling, Eli Skolmen Ryg*

*Writer-director: Dag Johan Haugerud*

*Producer: Yngve Saether*

*Cinematographer: Oystein Mamen*

*Production design: Tuva Holmebakk*

*Costume design: Ida Toft*

*Editor: Jens Christian Fodstad*

*Music: Arnaud Fleurent-Didier, Peder Klellsby*

*Castings: Celine Engebrigtsen, Jannicke Stendal Hansen*

*Venue: Venice International Film Festival (Giornate degli autori)*

*Sales: Picture Tree International*

*In Norwegian*

*159 minutes*



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