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VENICE 2019 Giornate degli Autori
Review: *Beware of Children*

by JAN LUMHOLDT

🕒 04/09/2019 - VENICE 2019: Could Dag Johan Haugerud's second feature be the best 157-minute Norwegian humanist film ever made?



Jan Gunnar Røise and Ella Øverbye in *Beware of Children*

Norwegian novelist, screenwriter, film director, librarian and humanist **Dag Johan Haugerud** has completed his second feature. A long time in the making, long in length (the longest in Norway since Liv Ullmann's three-hour *Kristin Lavransdatter* in 1995) and withheld a littler further for optimal exposure (his first feature, *I Belong*, although showered with national awards, did little travelling abroad), *Beware of Children* [\[+\]](#) is now premiering in the [Giornate degli Autori](#) section of the 2019 [Venice International Film Festival](#), inviting discerning world audiences to discover a budding European auteur of evident merit.

The ambiguous title may refer to the importance of looking after and caring for one's offspring, but possibly also looking out for and heeding warnings, as children's actions can indeed lead to ominous consequences. This happens when 13-year-old Lykke gets into an argument with her classmate Jamie on the playing field. In the physical heat of things, he is injured and taken to hospital, where he dies a little later. Parents, pupils and staff are unnerved, investigations and interrogations are conducted. What happened, and why? And what will the hereafter be like?

Meticulously unveiling layer after layer of seemingly random and clearly crucial details of the events, Haugerud introduces a group of very human human beings in the process. Both the "perpetrator" and the "victim" happen to have politician fathers, hers on the Labour side of the spectrum and his from a right-libertarian party with staunch adversaries, not least in academic circles. That the latter is in a relationship with one of the heads of the school may seem slightly odd and inappropriate – as is sometimes life itself, as we are tenderly reminded from time to time. The big issues include the question of whether Lykke's legal case will be dismissed due to Jamie's death being an accident or due to her age, while a pettier one is whether a Facebook memorial page for Jamie is against Norwegian state-school policy, since it's a privately owned American corporation. Turns out it is. "Beware of adults" may well be another heartfelt plea.

With about a dozen key characters, including parents, school staff, parents of both parents and school staff, and partners of some school staff, *Beware of Children* demands keen attention. People are introduced in an off-screen second, their relationship to others identified *en passant*, and additional key characters are mentioned but never seen. It's likely all part of Haugerud's empathetic realism but can on rare occasions feel a little consciously stylish. That Lykke is called Natalia at school (some teachers say Natalia) but always Anna by her grandmother may or may not have been a necessary quirk. But for most of these utterly well-spent 157 minutes, this work by a significant humanist filmmaker and his thoroughly first-rate cast and crew is a richly rewarding treat to behold. A second look is recommended, partly for pure gratification.

Beware of Children was produced by Norway's [Motlys](#) in co-production with Sweden's [Plattform Produktion](#) and [Film i Väst](#). The world sales are managed by [Picture Tree International](#).

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