



Presents

EASY LAND

A film by Sanja Zivkovic

88 mins, Canada, 2019

Language: English and Serbian, with English subtitles

Distribution

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LOGLINE

Jasna, a Serbian architect and mother, wants to create a better future for her daughter Nina, but her mental illness proves to be a problem in their relationship.

SYNOPSIS

Jasna (Mirjana Jokovic), a talented and ambitious Serbian architect, wants to create a better future in Toronto for her teenage daughter Nina (Nina Kiri), but her mental illness proves to be a major challenge in their relationship. With the aid of her medication, Jasna holds a steady but menial job at a kitchen store for a boss she feels is far beneath her. One day, Jasna gets the opportunity to prove herself and build the project of her dreams, but in order to do so, she must risk her stability and fragile relationship with Nina who is already on the verge of leaving her. Meanwhile, Nina, confused by her tumultuous home life hits bottom socially and academically. But when a work placement at a theatre company unexpectedly builds her confidence, she begins to believe in new possibilities for her future. With eviction looming, and Jasna's mental illness worsening, tension rises. Soon Nina faces a tough decision — chase a future full of possibility, or stay, helping Jasna build again, the better life they had dreamed of.

Country of production | **CANADA**

Runtime | **88 MINUTES**

Language | **ENGLISH, SERBIAN (subtitles)**

Shooting format | **2K, COLOUR, 1.85.1**

Exhibition formats | **DCP, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL FILE**

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 2016, I wrote and directed a short film CLEO as part of my residency at the Canadian Film Centre. This slice of life story explored a young woman's strange encounter in an unfamiliar immigrant neighborhood in Toronto. She experienced the environment as an outsider who had wandered outside of her comfort zone, her misconceptions about the people who lived there being challenged throughout the film.

The atmosphere of this lower income neighborhood reminded me of when I moved from Serbia to Canada with my family in 1994. It brought back a lot of memories, memories of my parents working really hard to set up a new life for themselves and their three young children. Kind of like Roberto Benigni in LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL they tried to make it look like fun but I was already six years old and could see through their performances. I had a sudden impulse to return to this environment in my next film and observe it from a different, more personal angle.

After CLEO premiered at TIFF in 2016, I headed back to Burnaby, BC and lived in my parent's house for six months. It was tough to come back after 10 years of living abroad in Europe and it was particularly hard to reconcile with my Serbian mother, who had expected I would have settled down and had a family by the age of 29. During this time, I thought a lot about our complicated relationship, and the love that existed between mothers and daughters in general, but was sometimes just not expressed in a conventional, obvious way. Yet it was still there, hidden underneath all the layers of issues that we are so preoccupied with in our day-to-day lives.

Pulling all of these elements together, I felt inspired to explore a mother-daughter relationship within the constructs of immigration and assimilation into a new society. Although the story of Nina and Jasna was initially inspired by my relationship with my mom, it soon took on a fictional life of its own as I decided to create a plot around Jasna's architectural model "Easy Land", a symbol for the hopeful but sometimes naive preconceptions that new immigrants can have of life in Canada.

The final theme that I felt compelled to explore in the film was the intersection between immigration and mental health, and the impact one can have on the other. It's something that I have observed within my community and that is still considered a taboo topic by many, especially an older generation who might see it as shameful.

Staying true to the film's underlying realism, I knew I needed to show Jasna's condition in all its severity, with all of its ups and downs, without trying to soften her experience. I also needed to show Nina as a complex character who is affected by both the culture clash of her Serbian upbringing in Canada as well as growing up with a single parent who is affected by mental illness. It was a lot to ask of the lead actresses, Mirjana Jokovic and Nina Kiri. I wanted them to go quite far in order to access these characters and I know it took a lot of trust on their part to let go and provide the performances that they did. I am forever indebted to them for trusting me and for believing in my vision for this film.

- Sanja Zivkovic | Writer & Director

SOUNDSCAPE AND MUSIC

Conveying the sounds of the urban landscape was always a big part of the concept for this film, along with the visuals of the neighbourhood. When Casey MQ and I initially started talking about the score over a year ago, we knew we wanted a classical approach but I was afraid too much music would drown out this atmosphere. I wanted the score to be non-invasive but still enhance certain tensions and emotions in the film. So we started out very small, very minimalistic and sparse. Casey kept experimenting with it and finally the score grew as he wrote music for a quartet. Listening to it now, I feel the music feeds into the urban landscape so much so it's hard to separate the two at times. At other times it takes over, and gives it the extra push it would have been missing otherwise.

CASTING

Casting the mother and daughter roles was the most important part for me as a director, I knew that would be the make it or break it for the film. It was hard because even though I had written the role with Nina Kiri in mind, I could not cast her if I didn't find the right Jasna to go with her. We had spent months in casting and there was no one in Canada who had the right energy to play along with Nina. Time was running out and finally, we ended up looking to cast one Canadian actress, one American actress. My hopes were that Mirjana Jokovic, who lived in LA, would do the role. Mirjana is not only the best actress I could imagine for the role but I also had this gut feeling that her and Nina would be great together. Mirjana and I had spoken to her over the phone a few times by then but nothing was set, and she was very busy at the time. It wasn't looking good until by some crazy coincidence, Nina called me out of the blue to tell me she's flying to LA to attend the Emmys. In the spur of the moment, I bought a ticket to LA and called both Mirjana and Nina to meet me for lunch. When we finally met I just stood back and watched the two of them embrace like they've known each other forever. I knew right then that the three of us would be making this film together.

- Sanja Zivkovic | Writer & Director

SANJA ZIVKOVIC | Writer/Director



Sanja Zivkovic is a Serbian-Canadian film director and screenwriter whose work is split between Belgrade and Toronto. Zivkovic's short film credits include NAŠA MALA TAJNA (2011) which screened at Cottbus, Cinema Jove Valencia, Belgrade Kratki Metar and MARIJINA EPIZODA (2014), which premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival, took home awards in Belgrade and Sarajevo, and has screened at dozens of festivals worldwide. Her next short film CLEO (2016) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and is currently playing at TIFF Picture Palace. Zivkovic earned her B.F.A. in Film Production at Simon Fraser University, attended the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, where she finished her Masters in Film Directing and is also a graduate of the Canadian Film Centre's Directors' Lab. Most recently she wrote and directed her first feature film, EASY LAND, which will have its world premiere at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival.

NINA KIRI | Nina

Nina Kiri was born in Belgrade, the former Yugoslavia, and grew up in Vancouver, British Columbia. After finishing her degree at UBC, she moved to Toronto to pursue her acting career full time. She starred in numerous small independent films, as well as Sanja Zivkovic's short film "Cleo" and her teaser "Manuela," for the Canadian Film Centre. Nina's breakout television role came when she was cast as young handmaid Alma in the Hulu drama "The Handmaid's Tale." Recently she filmed the third season of The Handmaid's Tale, and played a supporting role in the American indie film "The Code," directed by Tony Aloupis.

"EASY LAND is the kind of movie I always wanted to work on. When I met Sanja by complete chance at a party in Toronto in 2015, I couldn't have imagined that four years later we would have collaborated together three times on her incredible projects. I think we were meant to work together, and like many aspects of our working relationship, Easy Land felt that way too. Many things came together during the entire process: schedules worked out, Mirjana felt like a long-lost mother and friend to both of us the second we saw her at our first meeting in Los Angeles, and day-to-day on set, big and small problems were worked out smoothly. Working with Sanja is an unspoken bond; I know what she is thinking and what she wants, and vice versa. That kind of rare working relationship is incredibly special to me, and has allowed me to feel open and comfortable to access places within her characters. Nina in the film is very different from me, but I was able to play her to the best of my ability due to the relaxed feeling on our set – which to me is also largely attributed to our incredible producer Julie Strifler and the exceptionally talented cinematographer Maya Bankovic, not to mention every single crew member. There is something very special about working on a project that is so close to your culture, your history, and your background, and the chance to speak Serbian both in the movie and on set was very moving. This film represents a lot of circumstances that are important to note in both Canadian and international society: immigration, mental health, single motherhood, and our indisputable need for connection. I hope that audience members will identify with and enjoy this film as much as we did making it."

- Nina Kiri | Nina

MIRJANA JOKOVIC | Jasna

Mirjana Jokovic is a Serbian born actress. In 1991 Mirjana moved to the US and currently lives in Los Angeles, CA. She has acted in numerous European film productions, including: 1995 Palme d'Or winner UNDERGROUND (Lead), and CABARET BALKAN, as well as a number of American Independent Films. As well, has performed in a number of theatre productions, including ELECTRA (on Broadway 1999), various shows at ART (American Repertory Theatre) in Cambridge MA, ACT Theatre in SF, and the Sundance Theatre Workshop in UT. Graduate of Academy of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade, Serbia – 1988

Winner: BEST ACTRESS: Yugoslav Film Festival - 1994, 1991, 1990, 1989, 1988
 BEST INTERNATIONAL ACTRESS: San Sebastian Film Fest -1988
 BEST ACTRESS: Rio de Janeiro Film Festival – 1988

In 2005 she permanently relocated to Los Angeles where she began teaching acting at CalArts, California institute of the Arts. In 2008 she became Associate Director for Performance, School of Theatre and in 2010 Mirjana was appointed the Director of Performance and Head of MFA Acting Program, School of Theatre at CalArts, where she still currently oversees Directing and Acting Programs.

“How can we navigate or accept the circumstances beyond our control? Are there any limits to how forbearing can we stand for those we love? Jasna’s character, written on the page by director Sanja Zivkovic embodied complex psychological inner-landscape, not always attainable. While faced with real struggles, fears for the future and obligation to meet the expectations of being a single mother, her world was about to collapse even with all her efforts. The unraveling story portraying overwhelming emotions impacting someone’s life, to the extent of gradual disruption of even unmatched love for one’s own child, was profoundly moving to me, and I have hoped to bring these invisible struggles closer to home. As we are unable to always contribute relief, we can try to show some compassion... and many times, recognizing someone’s struggle can be quite enough. For even if one’s mind is wounded, there might be a boundless emotional intelligence, worthy to be recognized.”

- Mirjana Jokovic | Jasna

SAMMY AZERO | Arman

Sammy Azero is an actor, director and athlete born and raised Waterloo, ON, Canada. From childhood, he's had a passion for sports and was working to become a professional soccer player. He later channeled his hard work to study medical science at the University of Western Ontario.

He began to write and direct his own short films discovering a passion that lead to acting. He starred in multiple short films one of which made its way to TIFF (2016) called *Semblance*.

Sammy's career in acting began with a recurring role on CBS television series *In The Dark*, executive produced by Ben Stiller and Michael Showalter, portraying the character Wesley Monroe for 8 episodes. He has since played the supporting character Arman in the feature film *Easy Land*, written and directed by Sanja Zivkovic, and had the pleasure of acting alongside Ed Skrien in the feature *MIDWAY* directed by Roland Emmerich. He most recently landed the leading role in the feature film *Once Upon A Time in Tehranto*, written and directed by Faran Moradi, and spent some time shooting motion capture in Montreal as a co-star in an upcoming video game.

Sammy's love for all aspects of the film industry keeps growing, as he is continuing to pursue work behind the camera as a writer and director.

MAYA BANKOVIC csc | Director of Photography

Maya Bankovic csc is a Canadian Director of Photography working in feature films, documentary and television. Her work has screened at film festivals around the world including Sundance, Sheffield, TIFF, Hot Docs, Beijing International, New Directors/New Films and True/False. In 2019, her work on the documentary arts series IN THE MAKING was nominated for a Best Photography Canadian Screen Award for the visual language she developed for director Chelsea McMullan's episode about renowned choreographer Crystal Pite. In narrative fiction, the film WEXFORD PLAZA premiered in Torino and had its U.S. premiere at Slamdance in 2017, and her work on the CBC/Netflix Original television series WORKIN' MOMS was nominated for Canadian Screen Awards for Best Photography in both 2018 and 2019. EASY LAND is Maya's first feature film with Sanja Zivkovic.

CHRIS MUTTON | Editor

Chris Mutton is a Toronto based editor with over 15 years' experience in the film and television industry. EASY LAND is his second collaboration with director Sanja Zivkovic, after cutting her short film CLEO, which premiered at TIFF in 2016. The feature film LUBA won multiple awards at the Canadian Film Fest in 2018 and earned Chris a best editing in feature film nomination at the Canadian Cinema Editors awards. PORCUPINE LAKE, which premiered at TIFF in 2017, has made over 65 festival appearances around the world. Also premiering at TIFF was the feature documentary SILAS, executive produced by Leonardo DiCaprio's Appian Way productions, which Chris came on board to complete. Chris' editing work has screened internationally in France, Brazil, Serbia, Korea and throughout the United States. He is currently editing the television series HOLLY HOBBIE for Hulu in the U.S. and Family Channel in Canada.

CASEY MQ | Composer

Casey MQ is a Canadian composer, songwriter, musician and record producer from Toronto. Casey's music blurs between ambient productions and melancholic soul, distorted club music and electronic pop. At 17, Casey created the band 'Unbuttoned' and they have recorded two EPs and LPs respectively. During that time he began producing for other Canadian artists including Zaki Ibrahim, TiKA, and Cadence Weapon. In 2016, Casey was accepted into the Red Bull Music Academy which encouraged him to focus on his solo artistry. Growing up as a classically-trained pianist has had a clear influence on his style and approach. With time spent as a composer-in-residence at the Canadian Film Centre, Casey has subsequently gone on to compose original music for a number of films that have screened at TIFF, SXSW, & Hot Docs Film Festival including FIRECRACKERS, MARY GOES ROUND and TITO. In December 2017, Casey MQ released a collaborative EP with Paris-based artist 'oklou' entitled 'For The Beasts'. The EP is a reimagining of pop-star vocal samples in a mutated form. It is a celebration of darkness and light. As a DJ, Casey has a monthly online radio show called 'The Lightness of Being' on Montreal's n10.as. The mix show is a contemplative and reflective experience and often features guests from around the globe. Casey is also a part of an up and coming collective entitled 'Raven's Vision' who host monthly queer parties in Toronto. Casey's solo debut EP 'Nudes' was released on the Berlin-based label 'Creamcake' the fall of 2018 accompanied by a European tour.

JULIE STRIFLER | Producer

Julie Strifler is a producer and resident of the 2019 Canadian Film Centre Cineplex Film Program Producer's Lab. In 2017, Strifler joined award-winning production company Wildling Pictures. Recently, Strifler produced *EASY LAND* starring Nina Kiri (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and Mirjana Jokovic (*Underground*), a first feature film from writer/director Sanja Zivkovic which will have its world premiere at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival. In 2018, she was a recipient of Telefilm Canada's Talent To Watch and a finalists at the CMPA PrimeTime Throwdown: Best Innovation in Audience Building Pitch Competition.

In association with Wildling Pictures, Strifler served as an Associate Producer on *STARDUST* starring Johnny Flynn, Marc Maron and Jena Malone, a Canadian/UK co-production with Salon Pictures and on *THE SILENCING*, starring Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Annabelle Wallis which was executive produced by XYZ Films. In 2018, Strifler worked as a Producer's Assistant on *RANDOM ACTS OF VIOLENCE* written, directed by and starring Jay Baruchel alongside Jesse Williams and Jordana Brewster. Assisted on *RUN THIS TOWN*, directed by Ricky Tollman starring Damian Lewis and Scott Speedman which world premiered in 2019 at SXSW. In 2017, Strifler worked on award-winning A24/HBO's *Share* which world premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival followed by a special screening at the Cannes Film Festival. She also executive produced *BUNKER BURGER* a short film from writer/director Adam York which recently premiered at the 2019 TriBeCa Film Festival. Strifler is currently developing writer/director Alina Kulesh's feature project *THE PROPAGATION OF A HUMAN HEART*, while also producing her short film *LITTLE SOUL*.

Independently, Strifler has produced an award-winning music video, co-produced the short film *BABY BLUE* which will premiere at the 2019 Toronto New Wave Festival, and her first short *LIVING WITH DEATH* which screened at the 2011 Cannes Short Film Corner. Strifler is a member of Women in Film and Television and is based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

MATT CODE | Executive Producer

Matt Code is an award-winning producer of films and television and president of Wildling Pictures, a Toronto-based production company. Recently, Code co-produced *Share* with A24 and Loveless, which won multiple awards at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and will be a Special Presentation at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. Previously, he produced *Mary Goes Round* from writer/director Molly McGlynn, which premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, and won numerous awards internationally. He also produced *What Walaa Wants*, Christy Garland's Hot Docs special jury prize winning feature documentary which premiered at the 2018 Berlin International Film Festival. Recently, Code completed production as executive producer on Jay Baruchel's upcoming directorial effort, *Random Acts of Violence*, starring Jesse Williams and Jordana Brewster and is currently co-producer on *The Silencing* starring Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Annabelle Wallis. In 2019 he is also producing *Stardust*, a David Bowie biopic, starring Johnny Flynn, Marc Maron and Jena Malone and directed by Gabriel Range. *Stardust* is an international co-production with Salon Pictures out of the UK. Code is an alumnus of the Canadian Film Centre (Producers' Lab) and the Berlinale Talent Lab, and was the 2017 recipient of the Canadian Media Producers' Association's Emerging Producer Award (shared with Wildling partner, Kristy Neville).

KRISTY NEVILLE | Executive Producer

Producer and partner at Wildling Pictures, Kristy Neville has had films screen at TIFF, Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca and Stockholm, picking up two Sundance Special Jury Prizes along the way. In 2017 she won the CMPA Indiescreen Emerging Producer Award at TIFF alongside Wildling founding partner, Matt Code. That year, her films *CARDINALS*, directed by Grayson Moore and Aidan Shipley, and *MARY GOES ROUND*, directed by Molly McGlynn, on which Kristy served as co-producer, both premiered at TIFF. She returned to TIFF in 2018 with Jasmin Mozaffari's *FIRECRACKERS*, which went on to receive the Bronze Horse for Best Film at Stockholm Film festival and won the Canadian Screen Awards for Achievement in Direction and Editing. Upon release, *FIRECRACKERS* was named a New York Times Critic's Pick.

In association with WILDLING PICTURES

Since 2014, Wildling Pictures has been committed to developing and producing bold films for the international marketplace while offering production services to clients both domestic and international. In 2018, the company released 2017 Toronto International Film Festival Official Selections, MARY GOES ROUND from Molly McGlynn and starring Aya Cash, and CARDINALS from Grayson Moore and Aidan Shipley. Wildling also recently premiered FIRECRACKERS at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival and WHAT WALAA WANTS at the 2018 Berlinale. WHAT WALAA WANTS won the Special Jury Prize for Best Canadian Feature at Hot Docs in 2018. Most recently, Pippa Bianco's SHARE, a Wildling service production for A24 and Loveless Media, won multiple awards at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival and HOW TO BUY A BABY, a service production for Loco Motion Pictures was nominated for an International Emmy. The company is based in Toronto, Canada.



principal cast

Nina | NINA KIRI

Jasna | MIRJANA JOKOVIC

Greg | DANIEL KASH

Ben | RICHARD CLARKIN

Linda | SARAH DEAKINS

Arman | SAMMY AZERO

Shandra | STEFANI KIMBER

writer + director

SANJA ZIVKOVIC

produced by

JULIE STRIFLER

executive producers

MATT CODE

KRISTY NEVILLE

director of photography

MAYA BANKOVIC csc

production designer

DAVID DENNIS JR.

costume designer

KRISTIN SOMBORAC

editor

CHRIS MUTTON

composer

CASEY MQ

Shot on location in Toronto, Ontario