

# **WATERDROP (OT: PIKË UJI)**

a film by Robert Budina

Drama, Albania/Italy/Romania/Kosovo/North Macedonia 2024, 91 Minutes

**- PRESS KIT -**

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## **-Cast-**

Aida	Gresa Pallaska
Ilir	Arben Bajraktaraj
Mark	Paolo Iancu
Ben	Gerhard Koloneci
Elvis	Adem Karaga
Monda	Klodjana Keco

## **-Crew-**

Director	Robert Budina
Screenwriter	Robert Budina, Doruntina Basha, Ajola Daja
DoP	Marius Panduru
Editor	Enrico Giovannone
Music	Marius Leftărache
Producers	Sabina Kodra, Carmen Rizac, Daniele Segre, Daniele de Cicco, Luan Kryeziu, Sasho Pavloski
Production Companies	Erafilm, Redibis Film, Avanpost, Iliria Film, Manufaktura Production

## **-Synopsis-**

Aida, a tough business woman living in an Albanian town at the shores of Lake Ohrid, works a lucrative job as city planner responsible for the allocation of EU subsidies. While a large portion of these funds are pocketed by her corrupt boss, Aida isn't above taking the occasional bribe herself to keep her place in the ultra-masculine, patriarchal world. Her comfortable life is shattered, when her teenage son Mark gets accused of sexual assault by a class mate. Convinced of her sons innocence Aida starts to investigate on her own against the wishes of her husband and the police. During her search for the truth she encounters a wall of silence, envy and deep seated prejudice – and finally has to accept a heartbreaking reality.

In his third feature film WATERDROP Albanian director Robert Budina explores the painful experience of a mother facing the consequences of her own participation and complicity in a corrupt system. Embedded in a suspenseful thriller the film asks the very profound question: How much are you willing to sacrifice for justice?

## **-Director's biography-**

Robert Budina, is an Albanian independent filmmaker and producer. His first short LULEBORË participated in 40 festivals worldwide, winning awards in Tiff (Al), Algarve (Pt), Tanger (Ma). Budina's debut feature AGON screened at over 30 festivals and was Albania's Oscar nomination in 2014. A SHELTER AMONG THE CLOUDS his second feature, premiered at Tallinn Black Nights Festival, winning awards in Cinequest (Us), PriFilmFest (Ko), Valetta (Mt), distributed in Germany & Austria. Budina created the mini tv series THE SQUARE OF POWER with 40% audience share on Albanian national TV, completed his third feature WATERDROP and is developing a new tv mini-series THE INVISIBLE SUCCESSOR.

## Filmography

2004 SNOWDROP (short film)  
2012 DAWN  
2018 A SHELTER AMONG THE CLOUDS  
2022 „The Square of Power“ (mini tv series)  
2024 WATERDROP

***How did you come up with the idea for WATERDROP? Are there any real life inspirations and sources?***

In early 2019, several cases came to light in Albania involving the sexual assault of teenagers by their peers from wealthy and powerful families. As a long-time social justice activist, I've seen firsthand how some powerful figures present a different image in public than they do in private. Witnessing the human cost of this power dynamic, I felt compelled to write a story that would redirect attention to the perpetrators of violence and examine their moral relationship with their lifestyle. The result was a complex narrative that encapsulated all of these elements.

***How long did casting take. Did you have a vision for any particular actor you wanted to have in the film?***

The casting process took a year. More than specific actors, I had in mind references from various films that dealt with such complex themes, but at the same time, I wanted our actors' performances to have unique local elements that were also universal. So rather than just seeking excellent actors, I was looking for performers who could emotionally embody the inner lives of the characters and, above all, shared the same principles on the topic and were as sensitive as I was to the subject we were addressing. In essence, I was seeking an emotional involvement from the actors that went beyond mere acting.

With this casting philosophy, I ended up choosing Aida and Monda for two key maternal roles, in which the actresses Gresa Pallaska and Klodjana Keco, were not mothers themselves, yet are incredibly believable in these roles. I'm very happy that we chose such a casting philosophy.

***Gresa Pallaska acts amazingly as a stressed out mother coming to terms with her sons flaws. How did you cast her?***

I initially thought I'd find an actress for Aida's role in Albania, partly to ensure an authentic local dialect for the story's setting. However, unsatisfied with the available options and with only six weeks until filming, we expanded our search to Kosovo, despite its markedly different dialect from southern Albania where our story is set.

We shortlisted four actresses in Kosovo, sending them the script and asking them to self-tape some preselected scenes. Impressively, within just three days, we received their screen tests. Each actress brought a unique perspective to Aida's character. From these, we narrowed it down to two candidates, whom I planned to audition personally in Pristina.

With Gresa, there was an immediate, almost magical connection - a level of chemistry I'd rarely experienced in my collaborations. She intuitively grasped what I wanted for Aida, often without me even verbalizing it. Beyond her exceptional acting skills, Gresa proved to be incredibly supportive of her fellow actors. She brought dimensions to Aida that I hadn't initially envisioned. We truly lucked out in finding both a talented actress and a wonderful person in Gresa.

***The scenery at the shores of Lake Ohrid looks stunning but also mysterious. Did you always plan to set the film there? What role does this specific landscape play in the film?***

We decided to film in Pogradec, on the shores of Lake Ohrid, even before writing the script, precisely for the reasons you mention, and I'm very happy with the result. Another compelling reason was that the legend of Lake Ohrid aligned symbolically and beautifully with our story. The lake harbors a monster within it, which in a way represents the conscience of the people living on its shores. The lake itself symbolizes the depths where people hide their sins.

At the same time, the element of water was crucial to our story. Lake Ohrid is magical in all dimensions. Even the people who actually live on its shores seem to carry something of the lake's mystery in their behavior.

This location choice allowed us to weave the natural beauty, local mythology, and ancient history into the fabric of our narrative, creating a rich, symbolic backdrop for the complex themes we were exploring. The mystical quality of Lake Ohrid and its surroundings added depth to our characters and their struggles, enhancing the overall atmosphere of the film.

Lake Ohrid was the only place where this story could be visually narrated, providing a unique blend of historical depth and contemporary relevance.

***Aida, the protagonist of the film, seems to be willing to do everything for her son. How far can a mother's love go in your opinion? Why did you choose this mother-son-constellation as a narrative frame?***

I chose a mother to narrate this story because mothers are biologically more connected to their children and can realistically go to great lengths for them. Another crucial reason is that Albania is a very patriarchal society, and women play a significant role in maintaining this structure.

Aida is a strong woman who has decided to challenge men and climb high in her career and power at any cost. She succeeds until her son is arrested, and she must fight against a corrupt system from which she had benefited until now, a system led by men.

On the other hand, placing a mother at the center of the story offers a deeper dive into emotions and makes it much more complex. Aida must balance her career, maintain spiritual equilibrium, and simultaneously compete with men in a macho world. All these elements provided a golden opportunity for Aida's metamorphosis to be more powerful.

***Another important topic of the movie is the unspoken, but clearly visible patriarchal society, in which Aida operates. How important is that societal dynamic for the plot of the film?***

Aida's self-actualization in a patriarchal world is fundamental to our story. Women in Albania face immense challenges. Albanian society expects them to be exemplary mothers, work tirelessly, maintain the household, and simultaneously assert themselves against men who strive to retain control over decision-making in society, politics, and family.

In essence, women in Albania must exert four times the effort of men just to be considered their equals. This multifaceted pressure on women forms a crucial backdrop to our narrative, highlighting the complex social dynamics at play.

Our story explores how Aida navigates these conflicting demands. This juggling act provides rich material for character development and conflict.

By focusing on a woman's perspective, we delve deeper into the emotional complexities of the story. We see Aida's struggle to balance her ambitions with societal expectations, her fight against a corrupt system she once benefited from, and her ultimate realization that in trying to have it all - career, well-being, and family - she may have lost herself.

This approach allows us to examine not only the societal issues but also the personal cost of ambition and the intricate dynamics of family, power, and morality in a patriarchal society. It offers a nuanced look at how women sometimes navigate and even perpetuate systemic corruption, even as they strive to break free from societal constraints.

***WATERDROP subtly talks about the widespread corruption in politics but also in society in general. How important was that aspect to you?***

Throughout my life, I've worn two hats: that of an artist and that of a tireless activist fighting for justice against abuses of power. I've always held a deep conviction that art has a unique ability to touch people's emotional core more profoundly than any other medium. In my view, art can play a vital role in preserving justice within society.

My journey has often led me to the frontlines of social and political battles. I've approached filmmaking as a mission, believing in its power to profoundly influence people, encouraging them to reflect on their reality and grapple with existential questions about our times.

This approach dates back to my early days in art, when I was still a student during Albania's dictatorship. Even then, I was writing and staging theatrical pieces that subtly but pointedly criticized the regime. One such piece was so provocative that my professors, despite their admiration for it, feared allowing its performance due to the messages it conveyed. Yet, nothing came of it - it was 1989, and communism in Albania was already on its last legs.

I see cinema as a powerful catalyst for social change. My films aim to provoke thought, challenge the status quo, and urge viewers to question the world around them. This latest project continues that tradition, using Aida's story and her moral dilemmas to illuminate broader issues of corruption, gender inequality, and the personal cost of ambition in a society in flux.

By intertwining personal drama with social critique, I strive to create work that not only entertains but also sparks meaningful dialogue about the challenges we face in our ongoing pursuit of justice and equality.

***The film pretty openly criticizes misguided EU funding, which is mostly pocketed by ruling elites. Why is it so important to you to tell a story about this?***

Albania is plagued by blatant cases of corruption that have, in my view, driven the country into a dead end. Consequently, a large portion of Albanians are choosing to emigrate, having lost faith in their political class and believing that Albania is beyond redemption.

The European Union plays a complex role in this scenario. It acts as a balancing force in Albanian politics, but seems more concerned with maintaining political stability than fostering genuine democracy and justice. This approach has unfortunate consequences: EU funds, sourced from European taxpayers, are often misappropriated by Albanian power brokers who feel insulated by EU support.

This situation creates a vicious cycle. The EU's prioritization of stability over democratic reform inadvertently perpetuates the very issues it aims to resolve. It's a stark illustration of how well-intentioned foreign intervention can sometimes exacerbate domestic problems.

In our film, we explore these intricate dynamics. We aim to shed light not just on individual moral dilemmas, but on the broader systemic issues that shape them. By doing so, we hope to provoke thoughtful discussion about the challenges facing countries in transition, where the interplay between national politics and international interests can sometimes hinder genuine progress.

***WATERDROP will have its international premiere at the Warsaw film festival. In your opinion, what makes the film relevant for a European and international audience?***

What I believe could captivate an international audience is the portrayal of a woman's struggle for self-actualization, while simultaneously trying to maintain a spiritual equilibrium between her

career, family, parenting, and the power she seeks to wield. Each of these small battles carries a significant spiritual cost.

Aida has always believed she could manage it all, and indeed she did - until the day her son is arrested. At this point, her spiritual balance is shattered, and she realizes that she can have everything except herself and her spiritual well-being. I believe that in today's world, career has become a form of spiritual enslavement, leaving little room for nurturing one's spiritual well-being.

This narrative explores universal themes: the cost of ambition, the complexities of motherhood, and the moral compromises we make in pursuit of success. It delves into how our choices can have unforeseen consequences, not just for ourselves but for those around us.

***What do you hope for the audience to take away from watching WATERDROP?***

Career, power, and prosperity lose all meaning the moment you've lost yourself, the things you believe in, and your moral equilibrium in relation to universal justice. This is a theme as old as antiquity, yet it remains thoroughly modern, naturally approached in a completely different, more complex way today.

In "WATERDROP," we explore this timeless concept through a contemporary lens. We show how the pursuit of success can lead to a spiritual and moral void, even as external markers of achievement accumulate. Aida's journey illustrates how easily one can become disconnected from their core values and ethical compass in the relentless pursuit of societal definitions of success.

Ultimately, "WATERDROP" is a call for introspection and a return to core values, encouraging viewers to consider what truly brings meaning and fulfillment to their lives.