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YES Docu

Present

COLLECTIVE

A film by Alexander Nanau

109 minutes, Romania / Luxembourg

Best International Feature - Official Selection – Romania



Official Festival Selection

2019 Venice International Film Festival – World Premiere

2019 Toronto International Film Festival

2020 Sundance Film Festival

2020 AFI Fest

FINAL PRESS NOTES

Distributor Contact:

George Nicholis
Rebecca Fisher
Magnolia Pictures
publicity@magpictures.com

Press Contact NY/Nat'l:

Ryan Werner
Cinetic Media
(212) 204-7979 phone
ryan@cineticmedia.com

Press Contact LA/Nat'l:

Nancy Willen
Acme PR
(310) 963-3433 phone
nancywillen@acmepr.net

49 west 27th street 7th floor new york, ny 10001
tel 212 924 6701 fax 212 924 6742
www.magpictures.com

LOGLINE:

COLLECTIVE is a gripping, real-time docu-thriller that follows a heroic team of journalists as they expose shocking corruption in the Romanian national health-care system.

SYNOPSIS:

After an explosive fire claims the lives of 27 people at Bucharest nightclub, Colectiv, officials reassure the public that surviving victims will receive care in facilities that are “better than in Germany.” Weeks later, a rising casualty count leads intrepid reporters at the Sports Gazette to investigate. Just as a crucial tip exposes Hexi Pharma, a local firm’s culpability, the firm’s owner dies under mysterious circumstances and the health minister quietly resigns amid the uproar -but this is only the first chapter in a thrilling, ever-twisting exposé.

Closely tracking the efforts of the Gazette team as they methodically discover layer upon layer of fraud and criminal malfeasance, Alexander Nanau’s COLLECTIVE is a fast-paced, real-time detective story about truth, accountability, and the value of an independent press in partisan times.

Q&A WITH ALEXANDER NANAU

COLLECTIVE is a film about a massive violation of trust – and yet it’s also a testament to the idea of trust and the role of investigative journalism in reporting the truth, in making officials accountable. How did you embark on this journey?

The Colectiv fire was a national trauma. We had mass demonstrations that really felt like a wave of big change. For the first time it felt like the young generation was fed up and wanted to get rid of all the corruption. So we thought to do a film about it, but where to start? I put it aside while I went to shoot another film in Afghanistan. When I came back, I met with my co-producer from HBO Europe. It had gotten worse – people were dying in hospitals – so we decided to [look in] all possible directions for characters whose lives could say something about what was happening. The victims, the hospitals, the doctors, the state. And then the team around Catalin Tolontan began to uncover irregularities and how all this propaganda about how the state can treat burn patients might be a big lie. So the head of my team and co-author of the film, Antoaneta Opris, said, “Let’s try to get to Tolontan.” We thought following the press might be the right angle from which you could really describe the mechanisms of society, the relationship between power and citizens. When Tolontan saw that our team was thorough and serious about the investigations we’d done, I think that made him trust us. One day he called and said, “Listen, I might have something. I can’t tell you what it is, but we might be ready to let you film some of it.” And we ended up in this whole vortex of revelations.

Tell me a little about Catalin Tolontan. He’s best known in Romania as a sports journalist, right?

Yes. He is a famous sports journalist but he’s also famous for being an investigative journalist. What he did for the last fifteen or twenty years, in terms of investigations, was all in the sports world. He was investigating, for example, two ministers of sport who were corrupt. His findings brought them down and they went to prison. So he was a prominent figure even before [the fire]. Once he was on a case, it didn’t bode well for the politician he was going after. [Laughs]

What was it about the Colectiv fire that resonated so deeply with the public? What prehistory informed the reaction?

The club was quite popular, actually – underground, sure, but a very popular place many youngsters were going to. They were well-educated people from Bucharest. They seemed like the hopeful generation, the one in Romania that might change society. As you see in the film, the lyrics of this band [Goodbye to Gravity] were metaphorical for this generation about the corruption of the system.

And everyone saw that “it could have been my child.” The story was so emotional. People called their parents to come pick them up, saying they just had an accident, and then died in their mother’s arms in front of the club. It was a club with only one exit. And it had been authorized [to operate] mostly with bribes.

The details of this story are incredibly hard to wrap your head around – the callous indifference to human suffering is extraordinary. Were you shocked as you uncovered all the layers or did it all feel familiar?

No, it didn’t feel familiar. Everybody knows there’s corruption – doctors get bribes in hospitals. But nobody thought about the lack of humanity that this covered up, and that was the biggest shock. Emotionally, the hardest thing was to be with these parents who were lied to and whose kids lost their lives. They couldn’t save their children. It’s hard to imagine yourself in their shoes, helpless. The lack of humanity doctors had being tied to such a corrupt system is something that is very hard to understand. Something is dead in these people, something is not human anymore.

Would you attribute that to the impact of life under Ceausescu and the years following, the cumulative effect of living under that kind of authoritarian government?

I think so. For sure it’s a society formed by communism that continued to exist in the same way without any big change. You didn’t have an occupation like after the Second World War, you didn’t have litigation like you did in Germany. Communism lasted longer than National Socialism and the Nazis. So it definitely has to do with that. But I also think it has to do with this injection of a very harsh capitalism that took over after the change. People who were in power stayed in power and got very rich. And there was a big struggle for survival in the ’90s. I think this dehumanized the medical sector. Doctors were treated as gods for much too long. They lost their purpose. They were just money-making machines.

Most of the whistleblowers in the film, like Camelia Roiu, are women. Why do you think that’s the case?

In Romania women have evolved a lot more than men in society. I think they have a higher moral standard. And they have more courage.

What were your first impressions of Vlad Voiculescu, and how did you earn his confidence? He was a brand-new minister and he let you film all these back-room strategy sessions at a very sensitive time.

When I heard rumors that Vlad might be appointed the next health minister, I called and asked for a meeting. I think it took about a week before he answered. I explained to him what I was doing, and because he was from outside the system and knew what he would find, he knew that being transparent was the only chance he’d have to show he was

different. The minister before him was part of the Hexi Pharma [scandal]. There was proof the government was not clean and didn't have clean intentions. So he had the courage to let me film him. And we made this deal that I would handle sound and camera [myself] while at the Ministry – and in return I could film everything and he would not tell me “shut the camera off.”

The way his attempts to reform the system are given a nasty spin in the media mirrors tactics we see in the U.S, Britain, and elsewhere at the moment where populism is taking root.

Yeah - Italy, Brazil. The filming we did was in 2016, the turnaround year – it was the year of Brexit, the year Trump was elected. With Brexit, I couldn't even get out of bed. I didn't believe it. Then I realized that what we were filming on a small scale was really going on everywhere. We thought, whoa, it's not really a Romanian story anymore.

How did that affect the way that you filmed?

It might have made us more sensitive to this aspect. You know, populism in Romania is not something new here. It's how politics and society work.

You have a gift for creating intimacy with marginalized subjects – the homeless artist Ion B, the Roma children in *Toto and His Sisters*. Do you see COLLECTIVE as an extension or a departure from your prior concerns?

Here, what I was most interested in was how do people function who are generally working in the service of the community and society they're living in? Because as an emigrant [from Germany], I never felt I belonged somewhere, I never felt closer to one or the other society I lived in. So that was my curiosity. My personal approach was that I wanted to live with these people for a while and really try to understand them psychologically.

Do you put Mariana Oprea in the same category of interest?

Mariana is a very special case. The fascination that came with meeting her was – she was the only one who thought, ok, this is how I am now and I will not hide. Characters who have the guts to stand up for their own beliefs and personality interest me. No matter what comes, they survive.

Tolontan tells a hostile TV interviewer who accuses him of causing public hysteria that his job is to “give people more knowledge about the powers that shapes our lives.” Do you feel that's your role too as a documentary filmmaker?

Part of it, for sure. Part of it is my own process of understanding life and how it works. But the role of a storyteller might not be as technical as the role, let's say, of a journalist. My role is understanding through art how we function psychologically. People should

understand what powers influence their life, and then as a storyteller you go further and say, ok, what do we do with these powers that influence us? Who are we? What are our attitudes and beliefs and are they strong enough to stand up to this or are we just subordinates? That's the theme of the whistleblowers. It's why they suddenly say "I'm not going to play this game anymore."

Did you realize at a certain point that you had all the elements of a detective story or thriller on your hands?

Oh yeah. I think that influenced the way I shot it. It's funny, in the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, somebody wrote about the Hexi Pharma [scandal]. It was the beginning of May 2016. And she said, "It's like the Graham Greene novel *The Third Man*, where Harry Lime is diluting penicillin and selling it in postwar Vienna. But this guy in Romania makes Harry Lime seem like an amateur in comparison!" [Laughs] Well, Harry Lime ended up committing suicide when he was circled in. And one week later, the Hexi Pharma guy committed suicide. So it was already in my head.

How did your background in theater lead you into film? And how does it inform your thinking about storytelling?

Theater was the best school I had. The director I worked with as first assistant director and who was also a second father to me was Peter Zadek, one of the greatest German theater directors from the '60s to the '90s. And he was always looking for authenticity. I think that formed my eye. It's a relationship in theater between director and actor. I build relationships to my characters in the same way. I only continue with a scene or a character when I feel there is room in the relationship to get really deep and intimate. If I feel someone is closed and you'll never get too far into his being, then I stop. If I can't rid of their masks, then I'm not really interested in following them.

ABOUT THE PROTAGONISTS

CATALIN TOLONTAN (47) – investigative and sports journalist

Tolontan is a sports journalist and editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Gazeta Sporturilor. Over the last years, he gained great notoriety by leading a series of investigations on corruption in Romanian sports and politics which brought several resignations of ministers and a series of court cases that ended with the imprisonment of several politicians.

After the Colectiv club fire, he and his team of editors, MIRELA NEAG (47) and RAZVAN LUTAC (21) started to investigate the role of the state institutions involved in the Colectiv tragedy. Their investigation into the medical treatment in Bucharest hospitals that affected the Colectiv burn patients is one of the greatest journalistic investigations in Romanian history. Their thorough enquiry on the company HEXI PHARMA shattered the entire health system.

CAMELIA ROIU (47) – anesthetist, the Bucharest Burn Hospital

Roiu became the first Romanian whistle-blower after the Colectiv club fire. She decided to disclose to Catalin Tolontan and his investigative team at the Sports Gazette a secret well-kept by Romanian authorities about the cause of deaths of burn patients. Her courage inspired doctors and other people to come forward about the frauds in the Romanian Health System.

TEDY URSULEANU (29) – architect

Tedy is a survivor of the fire. Her looks changed dramatically, as she suffered severe burns on her head and body, and her fingers were amputated. Nevertheless, she is positive and happy to be alive. She embraces her new self and wants to become an example for others by using art to heal her trauma.

VLAD VOICULESCU (33) – finance specialist, philanthropist, Minister of Health (May - December 2016)

Voiculescu worked in Vienna as vice-president of an investment department in Erste Bank for many years. By the age of 27, he had founded the “cytostatic network”, a group of dozens of people smuggling cancer medicine from Austria, Germany and Hungary into Romania for diagnosed patients who had no access to medication.

As a former activist for patients' rights, he became the new Minister of Health once his predecessor was forced to resign. He opened the door of his ministerial office to Alexander Nanau, giving him unprecedented and constant access into the Ministry of Health.

NARCIS HOGEA (49) – engineer

Hogea is the father of ALEX HOGEA (19).

His son suffered severe burns in the fire in Colectiv and was taken to the Bucharest University Hospital. When Narcis wanted to transfer his son to the General Hospital in Vienna (AKH), the management of the University Hospital in Bucharest refused to approve the transfer. Alex was finally transferred one week after the fire to Vienna where he died on November 22nd from infections with multi-resistant bacteria.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

No interviews, no voice over. My process of documentary filmmaking is a purely observational one. It is a process of learning from the life of others, of growing on a personal level by getting as close as possible, up to a point of complete identification, with the chosen protagonists. When I start filming a story, at first I don't want to know too much from – nor about – my characters. I actually never know for sure if from the moment I step into their lives anything noteworthy of a cinematic story will develop further. But what I experience in the process, I am trying to frame in a way that will make the viewers feel as if they were living in close proximity to and discovering the characters. The viewer should feel as if witnessing his or her own process of personal growth through the life of others. That I think is what cinema should do.

I was born in Romania. I have lived most of my life in Germany, but at the end of 2015, when Romanian society was devastated by the Colectiv club fire, I was back living in Bucharest. By being right there at that time, I experienced the full extent of the blow suffered by a democratic European society which could never have imagined that dozens of people could die when going out to a club. The fire at Colectiv was a national trauma.

It felt like everybody in the country was part of it.

Like any single traumatized human, a traumatized society becomes easy to manipulate and to lie to. I have witnessed during the days after the fire an institutional lie about how the authorities were perfectly managing the tragedy, that was constantly repeated to a grieving population, through all media. I have seen manipulation silencing people and stopping them from asking questions for a time. While young people injured in the fire kept dying in hospitals.

My very first attempt was to understand the direct impact of the tragedy on the private lives of the survivors and of the families who had lost their children in hospitals, after the fire. Mihai Grecea, a filmmaker himself, is one Colectiv survivor who joined my team right after he woke up from a coma. Together with Mihai, I plunged into the big family of the Colectiv victims. I stayed as close to them as I could, through their innermost grief and their struggle to understand why they had to lose their loved ones, weeks after the fire, if the medical treatment that they received was as good as the authorities claimed. The hardest challenge for me, as a father, was to witness the pain that parents went through after losing a child. The pain of not having been able to save the life of one's own child, while it would still have been possible, because of the power and the lies of state authorities.

As I was aware that one day the same situation could hit my own life, I needed to understand more, to delve deeper, to reach and to try to film the well-hidden. It was an organic decision to follow the very few that also doubted the official version of the events. The ones that were asking the unexpected, yet simple questions. So, the office of the investigative team of journalists at the Sports Gazette, that started to investigate the role of authorities in the tragedy right after the fire, was the best place to start filming the part of the story I wanted to understand.

Though they had started out by looking for simple answers, the journalists plunged deeper and deeper into an entire network of lies and corruption within the healthcare system. Even when doubted by everybody, they didn't abandon their quest. Encouraged by the stubbornness of the journalists, a doctor walked into their newsroom and blew the whistle about the real state of Romanian hospitals and their inability to treat even one burn patient. More whistleblowers followed.

The investigations started to uncover a series of overwhelming facts about corruption in the healthcare system, which had endangered patients' lives for years. By then, I was already following the journalists' work with my camera, as they got caught up in a vortex of disclosures, reaching the highest levels of government. I followed every step and shared every risk the investigative team took.

As a silent witness, equipped with my camera, I could experience and frame the genuine, intimate life of journalists, and understand the process of how news is being born. From the first simple question the journalist is asking himself, to researching, reporting, gathering evidence, fact checking, approaching sources, up to deciding on page layouts, printing and publishing.

With the change of the Minister of Health, I took the chance to get my lens on the inner workings of the state government too. I was lucky to be trusted by an open-minded new Minister who gave me unprecedented access to the system from within. I brought my camera into advisors' meetings, during brainstorming sessions, and coaching meetings before going out to the press. I could witness crisis management decisions and personal breakdowns.

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The biggest challenge we faced during the editing phase of the film was to balance the real-life events, seen from different perspectives, and offer a better understanding of the powers that shape our private lives in a society.

When I started working on this film in early 2016, I never imagined that the year would be a major turning point for democracy all around the world. I never suspected that, by the end of the production, most of what could be said about Romanian society would be equally relevant for older, more established democracies, be it the UK, the US, Italy, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, etc. There was a pattern of populists taking over, lying and attacking the free press, misusing state institutions in their own interest and perverting the very meaning of liberal values and social structures. 2016 tested democracies worldwide, but it also tested each and every one of us.

- Alexander Nanau

PRODUCER'S NOTES

In November 2015, Alexander Nanau and Hanka Kastelicova, Executive Producer of Documentaries at HBO Europe, having co-produced with Alexander his previous film *Toto and His Sisters*, started discussing the idea of capturing in a documentary the collective phenomenon that was taking place in Romania. The social unrest and the total rupture between the Romanian society and those that were governing it, that took place after the deadly fire at the Colectiv club seemed to reflect a development that could already be felt in many countries in Europe and beyond.

The shooting of the film took place over a period of 14 months, followed by another 18 months of editing. The whole co-production of the film involved a team of 60 people from several European countries.

Collective started out of a personal curiosity about the inner workings of the governing forces that are influencing our lives, regardless of the country we live in. Starting from the tragic incident that led to a government fall in 2015, we take a look at the year that followed and the way authorities, journalists, and regular citizens dealt with it.

We became aware that this was not only an important event that needed to be brought to light, but that it also had a deeper meaning, that of dealing with the relation between citizens vs. state. This multi-layered story felt to be evocative of many countries' political situations nowadays. We live in a Europe where societies have constantly grown to be disappointed and unhappy with their governments, a situation that raised a question in many people's minds: are politicians still working in the best interest of the citizens? At that specific moment in time, Colectiv and everything that followed became emblematic for this social awakening.

Although the events portrayed in the film have been broadly publicized in national and international media, we understood the need to tell this Romanian story in a cinematic way for an international audience, as we feel its potential lays in the universal values that are the bases of our societies: freedom of speech, right to health, seeking the truth, and defending democracy. We trusted that Alexander with his unique style of observational filmmaking, which he proved he was able to handle so well already in his last film, could again make a story accessible to a wide international audience.

In a way, this has been a journey of awareness and responsibility for all of us involved in making the film. And we hope that the audience will experience the same enlightenment after watching the film, that would allow them to become aware of abuse of power by those who govern, and to value the importance of a free press working in the service of society.

Hanka Kastelicova, Bianca Oana, Bernard Michaux

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Alexander is a German-Romanian filmmaker born in Romania who studied directing at The Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB).

His documentary film, THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ION B was awarded an International Emmy Award in 2010.

His feature documentary film TOTO AND HIS SISTERS was a European Academy Award nominee 2015. The film had a wide international distribution and played successfully in festivals worldwide.

Alexander served as Director of Photography for the French/German documentary NOTHINGWOOD (Sonia Kronlund) that was shot in Afghanistan and premiered in Cannes as part of La Quinzaine des Realisateurs in 2017.

His latest feature length documentary COLLECTIVE will premiere at the Venice IFF 2019- as part of the Official Selection - Out of Competition and is a co-production with Samsa Film (Luxembourg) and HBO Europe.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

PETER ZADEK INSZENIERT PEER GYNT (2006) – director, DOP, producer, editor (premiere: Munich IFF 2006)

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ION B. (2010) – director, DOP, producer (premiere: Visions du Reel IFF 2010)

TOTO AND HIS SISTERS (2014) – director, DOP, producer, editor (premiere: San Sebastian IFF 2014)

NOTHINGWOOD by Sonia Kronlund (2017) – DOP (premiere: Cannes IFF Quinzane des Realisateurs 2017)

COLLECTIVE (2019) - director, DOP, producer, editor (premiere: Venice IFF - official selection)

CREDITS

Featuring:

CATALIN TOLONTAN
CAMELIA ROIU
TEDY URSULEANU
MIRELA NEAG
VLAD VOICULESCU
RAZVAN LUTAC
NARCIS HOGEA
NICOLETA CIOBANU

Director and Cinematographer ALEXANDER NANAU

Dramaturgy ANTOANETA OPRIS, ALEXANDER NANAU

Producers ALEXANDER NANAU, BIANCA OANA

Producers BERNARD MICHAUX, HANKA KASTELICOVA

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a film made in collaboration with MIHAI GRECEA

Film score KYAN BAYANI

Editing ALEXANDER NANAU, GEORGE CRAGG, DANA BUNESCU

Sound Designer ANGELO DOS SANTOS

Sound Mix MICHEL SCHILLINGS

Sound Mix Consultant FLORIN TABACARU

Sound Recording MIHAI GRECEA

Executive Producer HBO Europe ANTONY ROOT

HBO Romania Producer ALINA DAVID

Executive Producer Cinephil PHILIPPA KOWARSKY

Line Producer BIANCA OANA

Associate Producers JANI THILTGES, CLAUDE WARINGO

International sales CINEPHIL

International Press CLAUDIA TOMASSINI, ADAM J. SEGAL, RYAN WERNER