



ADVERTISEMENT

# 'Materna': Film Review

3:43 PM PDT 10/13/2020 by Jourdain Searles



Courtesy of Tribeca Film Festival

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**THE BOTTOM LINE**

*A thought-provoking debut.*

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## David Gutnik's debut feature tells the story of four women bound by a violent altercation on the New York City subway.

Watching David Gutnik's debut feature film *Materna*, I got a clear sense that he was trying to tap into both cultural and political diversity. As diversity has become the buzzword du jour, directors have been eager to keep up with the times. This has been a great incentive for white directors to put more consideration into casting roles and sometimes even deciding what stories to tell and how to tell them.

With that in mind, there also must be a consideration for how cast diversity changes the story and its tone in ways that not even a director can control. Originally slated to premiere at the cancelled Tribeca Film Festival last spring, *Materna* is an interesting case study for such considerations.

The movie tells the story of four women bound by a violent altercation on the New York City subway. In the the film's first moments, we see the women sitting uncomfortably, eyes full of apprehension. The subway is the one place where people from disparate backgrounds are forced to sit or stand in close quarters with each other, accepting of a variety of behaviors and eccentricities. The very concept of the MTA is based on compromise; no matter how we feel in our personal lives, we all must agree to tolerate each other and sometimes even work together within public, often cramped spaces.

Throughout the film, as we get to know these women and their families, Gutnik constantly brings us back to this subway setting, allowing viewers to use what they learn about the characters to better understand their actions.

First, we meet Jean (Kate Lyn Scheil), a well-off, solitary woman who makes her living with a mysterious virtual reality project. The opening scenes of the film show her in a motion capture costume, making very measured, poetic movements. Unfortunately, we are never given a full picture of what it is she does or why it makes her so much money. She lives alone in a luxurious, modern loft, going through her days in a steady routine. The only contact she has with the outside world is her mother, who calls her repeatedly, encouraging her to freeze her eggs and pursue romantic relationships.

We are given a similar portrait of Mona (Jade Eshete), an actress struggling with a turning point in her professional life. The show she's built her career on is ending, and she's seeking other employment while also dealing with her mother's constant nagging texts. Her frustration is amplified by the challenging scene work exercise she does with Wanda (Cassandra Freeman), an older actress who becomes a proxy for her mother. Eshete does raw, convincing work in a complicated role (which she also co-wrote with the director). And yet it feels as if her character would have benefited from more screen time.

The third woman we meet is by far the least developed. Lindsay Burdge plays Ruth, a conservative Jewish woman who believes herself to be better than the liberals she and her annoying husband (Michael Chernus) criticize on a daily basis. Their ideas are challenged by Ruth's younger brother Gabe (Rory Culkin), a leftist activist who acts as a necessary voice of reason. When Ruth's son Jared (Jake Katzman) gets in trouble at school for bigoted behavior, she is forced her to reevaluate her parenting. Burdge does her best with a clumsily written character who doesn't seem to believe anything that she's saying. Perhaps that dissonance is intended, but this reading doesn't remedy the central awkwardness of this portion of the film.

The fourth — and by far most compelling — story centers Perizad (Assol Abdullina) returning to her home country of Kyrgyzstan



the grandmother, respectively, much less opaque and drastic than the other narrative strands; instead, she has a husband that warrants its own film.

*Materna* links these stories together by giving each woman stomach cramps that interrupts her life. The aching is almost existential, bonding the women through trauma. It's a fascinating concept that almost feels like science-fiction, divorced from the family drama that proceeds it.

Oddly, the film has much less interest in the key figure of the man on the subway and how his actions bring these women together, if only for a moment. It's also notable that the man only interacts with the two white women directly, while ignoring the two women of color who are also in close proximity. It would have been fascinating to get a full image of the social dynamics of that subway car, especially with regards to how the women's respective life experiences affect the way they engage with the man and each other while in crisis.

But ultimately, *Materna* isn't interested in thrilling us. Gutnik would rather force us to sit with our differences, contemplating the possibility of coming together and understanding each other.

*Production companies: Ten to the Six Pictures*

*Cast: Jade Eshete, Assol Abdullina, Kate Lyn Sheil, Lindsay Burdge, Michael Chernus, Rory Culkin, Cassandra Freeman, Sturgill Simpson, Kaili Vernoff, Jake Katzman, Kara Young, Zhamilya Sydykbaeva, Jamal Seidakmatova*

*Director: David Gutnik*

*Screenwriter: David Gutnik,*

*Producers: Emily McEvoy, Liz Cardenas*

*Executive producers: Jade Eshete, Assol Abdullina, Amman Abbasi*

*Co-Producer: Katy Hollowell*

*Associate Producer: Emily McCann Lesser*

*Directors of photography: Greta Zozula, Chananun Chotrungrroj, Kelly Jeffrey*

*Production designers: Heather Yancey, April Lasky*

*Costume designer: Aku Murray-Adoboe*

*Editors: Elizabeth Rao, Brúsi Ólason*

*Color Artist: Damien Van Der Cruyssen*

*Sound Editing & Mixing: Roland Vajs, Peter Albrechtsen*

*Music: Andrew Orkin*

*Casting: Rob Decina, Kate Gellar*

*105 minutes*

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## 'The Kid Detective': Film Review

11:02 AM PDT 10/16/2020 by John DeFore

