East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

Nothing Extraordinary, Everything Important

Martina Buchelová's *Lover, Not a Fighter* (*Milovník, nie bojovník*, 2026)

VOL. 167 (SEPTEMBER 2026) BY ANNA BATORI

Martina Buchelová's feature debut unfolds through seemingly insignificant moments – awkward lunches, first crushes, family conversations, afternoons spent listening to music – and gradually reveals itself as one of the most emotionally engaging films from this year's Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Effortlessly balancing humor with melancholy, Buchelová crafts a coming-of-age story that finds profound meaning in the ordinary.

The film follows twenty-something Andrej (Adam Kubala), who lives with his grandmother and cousin Pet'o (František Beleš) in a modest apartment block. The story begins when the family's neighbor – convinced that his daughter Míša (Michaela Kostková) is a lesbian – arranges a family dinner in the hope of pairing her with Pet'o. Instead, Míša finds herself drawn to Andrej, which sets in motion a tender romance that serves as the catalyst for the film's richly episodic narrative. Around the central couple, Buchelová weaves a mosaic of interlocking stories: Andrej struggles with his self-destructive impulses and alcoholism; Pet'o searches for a place where he truly belongs; Míša grapples with the collapse of her relationship with Andrej; while her younger sister, Mia (Mia Sofia Arpášová), awkwardly navigates the uncertainties of first love. Divided into playful chapters, the film shifts freely across different moments in time and between multiple perspectives, allowing these seemingly modest episodes to accumulate into a nuanced portrait of adolescence, family, and first love.

Whether intentional or not, the film's mise-en-scène and narrative invite comparison with the cinema of Hungarian filmmaker Gábor Reisz. Like *For Some Inexplicable Reason* (2014) and *Bad Poems* (2018), *Lover, Not a Fighter* employs playful intertitles, breaks the fourth wall, and allows its narrative to

drift effortlessly between comic digressions and emotionally resonant encounters. Thus the resemblance extends far beyond shared themes of first love and generational conflict. It lies in the film's narrative rhythm, its gentle irony, and its confidence that life's most meaningful moments often emerge from conversations and everyday situations that initially seem entirely inconsequential.

One such example is the evolving relationship between Pet'o and Andrej, who initially appear to dislike one another. Their unexpected bond forms through Pet'o's pet guinea pig, his cousin's only companion. Desperate to expand his social circle, Pet'o invites a rough-looking acquaintance into his apartment, only for the new friend's pit bull to kill the guinea pig. By the film's conclusion, Andrej quietly reconciles with his cousin by bringing him a kitten.

Like much of *Lover, Not a Fighter*, these seemingly modest episodes effortlessly blend absurdity, humor, and loss. Showcasing how Buchelová weaves a series of standalone micro-stories into a seamlessly cohesive narrative, each of them has a complete emotional arc and becomes a vital piece in the film's larger emotional mosaic. In this way, the director demonstrates exceptional control over the film's richly textured, composite structure.

Buchelová's humorous episodes effortlessly produce moments of genuine emotional weight. An awkward lunch between Andrej, his father (Jaroslav Vojtek), and his father's much younger girlfriend gradually gives way to an absurd discussion about the shape of whipped cream floating on pumpkin soup, while the grandmother's sudden fall and hospitalization quietly remind both the characters and the audience of the fragility hidden beneath the film's playful exterior. Comedy and grief are never treated as opposites but as fundamental human emotions that coexist in delicate balance. Their constant interplay not only deepens the film's emotional resonance but also propels the narrative forward.

Perhaps the film's most remarkable example of this delicate emotional balance is a seemingly incidental narrative detour that follows Mia and her budding romance. While the two teenagers spend the day together after skipping school, Mia suddenly recognizes a man in a shopping center, which triggers a traumatic childhood memory. The flashback reveals how, as a child, she had accepted a lift home from a trusted family acquaintance who began telling her that he loved her and wanted to buy her a ring. Realizing something was wrong, she fled the car and sought help from a shop assistant.

This flashback is shot almost entirely from Mia's subjective perspective. By not showing the child directly, Buchelová immerses the viewer in her uncertainty and fear. She skillfully portrays childhood grooming with subtlety and sensitivity. Instead of sensationalizing trauma, the sequence quietly shows how these experiences linger on and influence daily life long after they occur. It also

highlights Buchelová's talent for turning seemingly minor stories into moments of deep human understanding. Also, the willingness to grant secondary characters equal emotional weight sets *Lover, Not a Fighter* apart from conventional coming-of-age dramas. As we see, the film's 'side tracks' are not mere digressions but integral components of its emotional architecture. Each seemingly minor episode deepens our understanding of the characters' frustrations, vulnerabilities, and ways of coping with adolescence.

The director also carefully maintains the film's emotional equilibrium. While *Lover, Not a Fighter* tackles tough issues like childhood grooming and the grandmother's hospitalization, it avoids turning into a tragedy. Instead of letting these moments dominate, the film uses intertitles to reassure viewers that the characters will persevere. These subtle narrative cues keep the story from becoming melodramatic.

The film's compelling nature ultimately stems from its distinctive voice. It is witty without descending into cynicism, nostalgic without idealizing youth, and emotionally sincere without becoming sentimental. Buchelová understands that adolescence rarely unfolds through dramatic turning points. Instead, it is shaped by countless fleeting moments whose significance only becomes apparent in retrospect. This sensibility is reinforced by the film's visual style. Mobile-phone footage is interwoven with handheld, almost cinéma vérité camerawork, while frequent intimate tracking close-ups immerse the viewer in the characters' everyday lives. Rather than aestheticizing adolescence, Buchelová captures it with remarkable immediacy. This makes the film feel less like carefully orchestrated fiction and more like a collection of lived memories.

Lover, Not a Fighter is warm, inventive, bittersweet, and effortlessly charming. It stands out as one of the strongest debuts in Karlovy Vary's Proxima Competition and as one of the festival's finest discoveries. By transforming life's seemingly insignificant detours into moments of extraordinary emotional truth, Martina Buchelová announces herself as one of the most promising new voices in contemporary Central European cinema.