

Officially selected for Toronto FF 2011

# THE GOOD SON

*A Film by Zaida Bergroth*



## Synopsis

After a scandalous premier, actress Leila Manner (Elina Knihtiä) flees the reporters to the family's old summer villa with her two sons. Short-tempered Ilmari (Samuli Niittymäki) is his mother's confidant and protector, whereas his younger brother Unto (Eetu Julin) is an insect enthusiast and a loner.

Their peaceful time together is soon interrupted when Leila invites a group of her friends over to spend the weekend. Joining the others is author Aimo (Eero Aho) whom Leila falls for, despite trying to resist. At the same time, the weird waitress Karita (Anna Paavilainen) at the local pub approaches Ilmari telling him that she saw his arrival in a dream.

When the other guests leave, Aimo stays. Ilmari is not pleased with the intruder, although Leila assures him that Aimo is nothing like her previous men. Gradually, Aimo starts to have enough of the youngster's insolence. Ilmari tries to escape the situation in the company of the fascinating Karita, and Leila, who is in love, turns a blind eye. The atmosphere at the villa surrounded by woods becomes threatening.



## ***Production Info***

Production Company	BUFO
Producer	Misha Jaari, Mark Lwoff & Elli Toivoniemi
Cinematographer	Anu Keränen
Editor	Jan Forström
Sound Editor	Micke Nyström
Scriptwriter	Jan Forsström & Zaida Bergroth
Director	Zaida Bergroth

## ***Technical Data***

Production Year	2011
Country of Origin	Finland
Language Spoken	Finnish
Duration	87 Min.
Shot on	Canon 5D
Screen Ratio	16:9
Format	DCP/35mm
Sound	Dolby digital

## ***Cast***

Illmari Manner	Samuli Niittymäki
Leila Manner	Elina Knihtilä
Unto Manner	Eetu Julin
Aimo Marttila	Eero Aho
Karita	Anna Paavilainen

## ***Production Company***

Bufo  
Meritullinkatu9a21  
00170 Helsinki  
[www.bufo.fi](http://www.bufo.fi)

**ELINA KNIHTILÄ as LEILA MANNER: "One of the most important roles of my life "**



– What struck me especially in the script was the responsibility of parenthood. I have a son myself, and the script made me think about the balance of a parent-child relationship. Even though I'm hopefully nothing like the mother in the film, I could recognize some of my own fears in it. Am I really a grown-up myself? That's what the film in many ways is about, the roles getting mixed up, who really is the child and who the grown-up.

The film comes close to Knihtilä not only in terms of parenthood; the main character is also an actress.

- At her worst Leila is a diva and a star. But underneath all that is insecurity and bad self-esteem. I haven't really met divas like her, but I do recognize some of her traits. One of my favourite scenes is her getting angry out of all proportion when Aimo mildly criticizes her work. I hope I'm better at taking criticism, Knihtilä laughs.

Themes close to home didn't scare Knihtilä:

- I like digging into the dark regions, even though it can be sometimes tough.

- Though the scenes were difficult, everything went very painlessly and easily. We had the the space and the time we needed.

The film was shot chronologically, partly in order to make things as easy as possible for the actors.

- This way of working was a real luxury. We became so spoiled that when we twice had to slightly deviate from the chronology, we made a big deal out of it, as if we were totally confused, she laughs.

Knihtilä praises all the other actors, but is particularly excited when speaking of Eetu Julin who plays Unto, the younger brother.

- It's unbelievable how professional a 9-year-old could be! In one scene I was crying and Eetu asked me: "Do you think sad thoughts when you cry? Do you think of dying?" He had grasped the most essential thing about acting, that it's really about thinking.

Leila's part was written specially for Knihtilä. Surprisingly enough, it was her first lead role in a drama, after being many times awarded for comedy and supporting roles.

- I feel privileged, having had the opportunity to work with Zaida. This has been such a wonderful experience that after the shoot I started to grieve: was this it, the role of my life?



**SAMULI NIITTYMÄKI as ILMARI MANNER: "All children want to please and defend their parents"**



For Samuli Niittymäki the role of Ilmari was his first leading role in a feature film.

- It fulfilled all my expectations and more. Great team, great summer, wonderful location.

- I accepted the role before we knew whether the film would get any financing, or whether we would do it without any money. And when we ended up getting paid, well, even better.

In Ilmari's role Niittymäki found feelings familiar to him from his own childhood.

- All children want to please and defend their parents. Ilmari has somehow become the mental caretaker of his mother, he has lost the connection with his own feelings and desires. Ilmari's will is his mother's will.

Despite that, Niittymäki doesn't really feel that there's something wrong with Ilmari. The trip to the countryside just throws the family into situations which push them to their limits.

- Anyone would have it tough in those circumstances.

Acting with experienced colleagues wasn't intimidating. Elina Knihtilä Niittymäki already knew from theatre school – as a teacher.

- Even though this is clearly Zaida's and Jan's film, they have the courage to let go and trust the actors. They both have strong intuition, and that made it possible to deviate from the script and the initial plans if we felt like it.

## EERO AHO as AIMO MARTTILA: "I got to play a nice guy for a change "



A colleague once said that with a face like mine I'm only going to get the roles of mean bastards, Aho laughs. – It's great to play a nice guy for a change.

Some of the test audiences described Aimo Marttila as the only "normal" person in the film's gallery of characters. What makes the pleasant Aimo hook up with a difficult actress?

- Falling in love. And Elina Knihtilä is quite a charming woman, Aho adds, laughing.

Aho appreciated the work method and its emphasis on acting. The scenes were shot with two cameras, in long takes. There was less of the waiting, so typical of normal shoots.

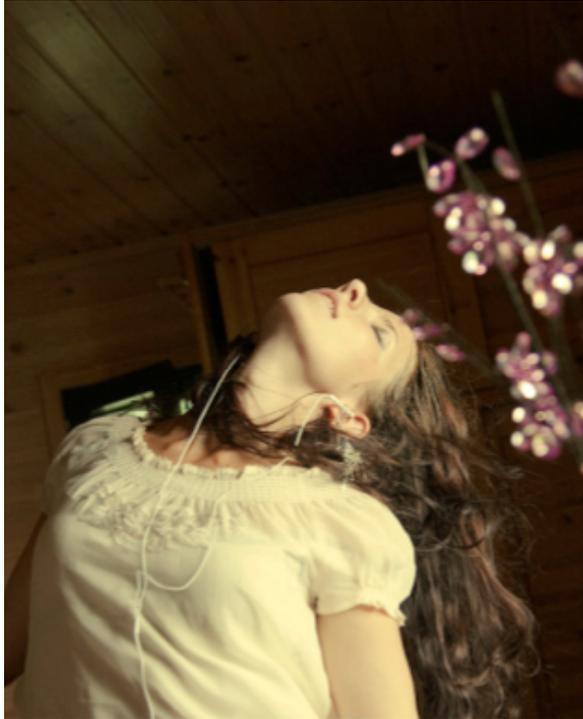
- I didn't really have to act all that much, it felt so close and personal all the time. Zaida is a very precise director of actors, never angry or tense.

- The film became something unique. It's intimate, in a way very Finnish, and on the other hand very unlike other Finnish films. I don't remember ever seeing a film like this.

## **ANNA PAAVILAINEN as KARITA: "I'm a small town girl myself "**

The role of the mystical small town muse, Karita, was in many ways familiar to Anna Paavilainen.

- I'm a small town girl myself, that's why Karita doesn't feel all that out there to me.



Karita's way of romanticizing her life and longing for somewhere else are probably things most people remember from their teenage years.

All through her career Paavilainen has played characters younger than herself, as is the case with Karita.

- Sometimes it's difficult to know how to bring your life experience to the role, but then again not too much of it.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most difficult scenes were not the teen sex scenes, but those where she had to dance. Dancing suddenly felt a lot more revealing and personal than sex.

Paavilainen praises the fact that screenwriter-editor Jan Forsström was

with them during the shoot. When needed, Forsström helped making changes to the script, and was all the time editing the material as it was shot.

- Often at shoots things are played safe by taking a huge number of shots and takes. In this case we shot only what was needed, and then if it didn't turn out to be enough, we went back and shot what was missing .

- I'm touched by how all the characters are just trying to do their best. People are not bad or evil, but still things get messy. Everyone's just trying to survive and get their share of love.

## ***DIRECTOR-SCREENWRITER - ZAIDA BERGROTH: "When the one closest to you suddenly turns into something alien"***

Zaida Bergroth has directed the awarded short films Glass Jaw (2004) and Heavy Metal (2006). Her first feature was Last Cowboy Standing (2009), which won the Flash Forward –award at Pusan FF 2009, as well as the Finnish Jussi awards for best screenplay and best sound design.



### **A word from the director**

The first idea for The Good Son was a character with a twisted sense of responsibility. I guess it came from somewhere within me: I do have a tendency to take on responsibility, even for things I can't really affect or which shouldn't be my concern. A variant of a narcissistic disorder, I suppose. I wanted to exaggerate and examine this trait, take it to its most extreme forms.

In the end the idea grew into a story of a boy who has taken upon himself so much responsibility that he has become the protector of his family and his mother. Through this "mission" the boy has found his place in the world. The mother, a famous actress, has subconsciously supported this trait in her son; because of her own insecurity she has trained him to be her shield against the hostile world. The boy is dangerous, but for the mother this, too, is a sign of his love. The relationship is warped, but has developed so slowly that it's very hard to see this from the inside.

The drama begins when an outsider arrives: the writer Aimo, who falls in love with Leila. Aimo understands the situation, but in the end doesn't know how to react to it properly. Because of his own weaknesses he can't stay away from the son's territorial games.

At the early stages of working on the story of The Good Son, we talked a lot about a big favourite of mine, Sunset Boulevard by Billy Wilder, the black humour and fatalism of it. On the other hand we talked about, for example, the realism and lack of artifice of Ken Loach's films. Somewhere at the back of our heads there was also a figure close to me (and many other Finns), the vengeful Kullervo from the Finnish national epic Kalevala. Ilmari's violence and rage have something in common with the wronged Kullervo's lust for revenge. Ilmari doesn't have the words to express himself, in contrast to Aimo the writer, and Ilmari is left with no other options but violence.

The last missing piece of the puzzle was found when Karita, Ilmari's love, came along. She could be the saviour of the story, but in the end she is too immature and hurt in her own life.

I hope that all the characters are human and understandable, even though hopelessly lacking in many ways, all prisoners of their own points of view.

One of the most important moments in the film for me is when the mother finally understands the dangerousness of her own son. The horror of what is closest to you suddenly turning into something alien.

Despite the heavy themes I did not want the film itself to be heavy. I was aiming for something quite fast-paced, suspenseful even. I also wanted humour in the film, stemming from its impossible characters. Positive craziness, the absurdity of life.

My previous feature, *Last Cowboy Standing*, was a long process and a relatively big production. This time I wanted the opposite: to make a film which would be fast to make and light in terms of production. *Last Cowboy Standing* was a broad, epic family saga, whereas *The Good Son* is a short and intense portrayal of eight days and nights.

I had been writing the script with Jan Forsström for a longer time, but the actual production was very fast: in January 2010 I decided to shoot the following summer, with whatever money we could get at such short notice. I didn't want to put the project through years of looking for finance etc. I managed to get a small but very professional and dedicated crew. All were ready to embrace our way of working and committed to the film even though we had no idea about the size of the budget. The production company Bufo and its producers Mark Lwoff and Misha Jaari, who I both knew from my film school days, created together with producer Elli Toivoniemi a very efficient and inspiring working environment, which made the unorthodox production methods I had dreamed of possible. To my delight, the Finnish broadcasting company YLE and the Finnish Film Foundation took the chance and joined us as financiers.

The most important aspect of this project was clear to me from the beginning: somewhat in the spirit of the *Dogma* films I wanted to focus on the acting. We decided to shoot in chronology, with a fast 20-day schedule. We shot hand-held, with two small cameras, I myself operating the other one. I got exactly the actors I wanted: Elina Knihtilä and Samuli Niittymäki were with us already at the early stages, and the roles are very much written with them in mind. After the joining of Eero Aho and Anna Paavilainen I had an ensemble of actors who were excited about trying out different ways of working, and who all came onboard when we had no certainty of getting any financing.

The experience was wonderful: the fast but flexible way of working felt ideal for this story. I hope that the spontaneity of the method is also transmitted to the screen.

## **SCREENWRITER, EDITOR, MUSIC CONSULTANT - JAN FORSSTRÖM:**

**"Reality won over the imagination of the screenwriter"**



The Good Son is Jan Forsström's third feature as a screenwriter. The previous two are Zaida Bergroth's first film Last Cowboy Standing (2009) and The Visitor by J-P Valkeapää (2009, Nordic Film Prize in Gothenburg FF). Forsström has written numerous short films, and has also directed two, Nightmares (2006) and The Doorman (2010). Forsström has also worked as editor and script editor in various productions. For Last Cowboy Standing Forsström won the Finnish Jussi award for best screenplay together with Antti Raivio and Zaida Bergroth.

### **A word from the screenwriter-editor**

As a screenwriter, The Good Son was in many ways an ideal process for me. I could try out ways of working I had secretly dreamed of, but which are rarely possible.

From the beginning this was very much a project of our own, we were just concentrating on the story we wanted to tell and had no outside pressures of any kind. I thought that director-screenwriter Zaida Bergroth's basic idea about a teenage son as a sort of a bodyguard for his mother was both simple enough and complex enough, as well as being perfect material for Zaida. Having placed that set-up in a social milieu we both knew well, the storyline evolved very naturally. We knew these people: the hopelessly immature parents, the artists and their egos. The wordless but inwardly seething teenager, the small town romantic with stars in her eyes, the hermit-like young brother living in a world of his own. The main thing was to stay truthful to our characters, not softening them, and on the other hand not judging them too harshly either.

The story has thriller elements, but more important than the suspense was telling the story honestly and believably. Not "dramatizing" it too much, not making it too movie-like, but rather just telling it plainly and truthfully, with all the nasty bits, but also with all the humour and the hope. For even though the storyline might be somewhat tragic, we see a lot of hope in it.

In the winter of 2010, after a year and a half of writing, Zaida decided to shoot the following summer. At the same time we made the decision to try to keep the script "open" as long as possible, letting the rehearsals, locations etc. influence it more than is usually the case. Often the script has to be "locked" quite early on, because of reasons concerning production, complicated logistics and schedules etc. With The Good Son we wanted to keep the production small and flexible, to make last minute changes and spontaneous decisions possible.

The actors had a key role in the process: the readings and rehearsals helped the script a lot, and many clumsy moments were quite naturally eliminated. Samuli Niittymäki's portrayal of Ilmari was more complex than what we originally had in mind, and together with Zaida we wrote the character more towards the direction

Samuli had pointed for us. We also allowed the locations to influence the script, for example, the fact that Karita works in a pub was a change we made after finding a location we liked.

One more example of letting the outside factors and/or reality influence the story was the character of the younger brother, Unto: He was inspired by a very young dragonfly expert Zaida met while acting as a judge in a short film competition for young filmmakers. Unto's films and voice-overs are very much influenced by the nature documentaries this real boy had made. We ended up asking him to help us out, and all the dragonfly shots in the finished film are actually shot by this real, young nature enthusiast.

The openness continued during the shoot. The schedule was on purpose somewhat loose so that changes would be possible on set as well. Some things were deliberately left undecided, of some scenes we had two different versions etc. This was of course made possible by the story itself, being mostly set in one main location and with only five main characters.

Because we used a digital shooting format, I could get the material very fast to my temporary editing room next to the set. And since the film was shot chronologically, I could follow the story taking shape. This led to some extra scenes, which were written during the shoot, things we had a hunch the story might need, even though we couldn't necessarily explain that need in dramaturgical terms. Those little moments, which often are the first ones erased from a script as the scripts get streamlined to the bare move-the-story-along essentials.

The method also gave us the possibility to go back and reshoot, if it felt like some scene was missing an important moment or a shot. This way of working obviously demands a great deal of flexibility both from the production team and the crew and is seldom possible, at least with Finnish budgets, but felt very good and was definitely beneficial to the film.

I've rarely had the chance to work in the same project both as the screenwriter and as the editor. With Zaida we decided to try the combination. To me, changing roles has always seemed quite easy: the actors and all the different artists and craftsmen involved have always brought so much of their own to the film, as well as the actual shoot with its surprises, starting with the weather, so that the material shot is always something independent from and much more than the original script. And on the other hand, working on material based on one's own text is quite liberating: there was never any fear of having misunderstood some nuance, and with Zaida we couldn't blame anyone except each other for the inevitable and suddenly obvious shortcomings of the script.

For me, editing is mainly about creating structure. Films are "rewritten" during the editing, and this very much applies to *The Good Son* as well. The extra scenes, which were not in the script, proved to be quite helpful. I had more building blocks than I'm used to. Most of the scenes were shot with two cameras, which was helpful to the actors, but also gave us a lot of material, over 40 hours.

For the music of the film we wanted to use existing songs. That seemed to fit the straight-forward approach better than a composed score. Existing songs always

come with baggage, layers of history and meaning, and we wanted to use that to make the scenes richer and more complex, to add some irony or contrast.

Most of the songs we had already at the preproduction stage. This allowed us to use music in the rehearsals, and scenes could be built with the music in mind. Some of the songs were played during the shoot, to help find the right mood. Examples of this are the drive in the beginning with The Black Angels providing some comic coolness, and the Finnish evergreen *Sinun omasi* by Tamara Lund as the emotional background for Leila's and Aimo's dance.

Especially for the character of Karita finding the right music was very important and in some ways even defined her. The Finnish-French band *Mi And L'Au*'s music had just the right mixture of beauty, strangeness, fatalism and innocence. All those teenage feelings, but also something more, something harder to define. The moods of their songs seemed to fit the film so well that we decided to take the collaboration further, and *Mi And L'Au* composed some new music for the film as well.

The script is the basis of the film, and it of course has to be firm. But when it comes to the richness of detail and levels of meaning, reality always wins over the imagination of the screenwriter. A good director has the guts to abandon the worked-out solutions of the script and let the richness and the impenetrability of reality enrich the story. In *The Good Son* this was expressed out loud, we wanted to approach the script as an ever changing blueprint rather than something written in stone. This made the writing something other than a literary effort done prior to the shoot. Instead it was a process which went on all the way through the various stages of the film, its final aim being to find the best possible form for our story. Even though the finished film and our shooting script are actually not that far from each other, I do still feel like this change of attitude was crucial for the film.

## **THE CINEMATOGRAPHER - ANU KERÄNEN: "I got closer to the actors than ever before"**

Anu Keränen has been the DoP of Zaida Bergroth's short films Glass Jaw and Heavy Metal and the feature Last Cowboy Standing. Among other things, Keränen has shot various short films by the acclaimed Finnish visual artist Jani Ruscica.

### **A word from the cinematographer**

When in the spring of 2010 we started to plan the production, the director Zaida Bergroth had some clear guidelines. Zaida wanted as much freedom as possible on the set – the camera should follow the actors and not the other way around – and the possibility to improvise. Also shooting chronologically was important.

I remember that Zaida in some meeting promised to push the cinematographer (and the camera) into a room with the actors, and see what would happen!

This was made possible by a precisely written script and the fact that the film is mostly set in one main location, a summer villa. We did plan where in the villa the scenes would take place, but other than that we did not break the scenes down into shots.

For lighting this meant lighting the spaces, rather than the actors. The aim of this way of working was to give the director and the actors room to really think how to react in a given situation, in the actual set. And preserve the joy of discovery!

For a cinematographer this meant having to really react to what was happening in front of the camera, judging what was most important and following that.

We wanted to shoot with two cameras, the other one operated by the director herself.

Since we wanted to keep the production "light" and fast-moving, we chose a digital HD-format and small cameras. The whole film is shot hand-held, to achieve the movability we wanted, only some exterior shots of the villa are shot using a tripod.

Since we shot without an exact storyboard, as a cinematographer I was obviously always nervous before the first shot, wondering how the scene would turn out visually. We almost always shot long takes, covering the whole scene. I tried to focus on the present moment, to really see what's happening in front of me, and not concentrate too much on the technical aspects – the composition, the lighting etc. – in order to be able to react as quickly as was required, staying in the same rhythm with the actors. The actors themselves didn't know who the camera was following. Of course with Zaida we tried to not get into each others frames too much...

One of the biggest questions for me was when to avoid "commenting" on the action too much with the image – and when to be more daring and imposing.

As a cinematographer, I got closer to the actors than ever before. I feel it as a great sign of trust and a source of joy to be able to observe people this close, this intimately.

## **MUSIC – MI AND L’AU**

Mi And L’Au are a mystical Finnish-French duo, who have gained a cult following and have received excellent reviews for their albums. Finnish Mira Romantschuk, who previously worked as a model, and Frenchman Laurént Leclère, who had worked on film scores, found each other in the beginning of the millenium and have since then devoted themselves to each other and their music. Their first, eponymous record was released by Michael Gira’s (Swans) Young God Records. Good Morning Jokers was released in 2009, and currently the duo are working on a new album, entitled If Beauty Is A Crime.

Initially Mi And L’Au were contacted for the right to use some of their already released songs, but the collaboration proved fruitful and The Good Son features also new and unreleased songs and score music by Mi And L’Au.

Mi And L’Au in Myspace: <http://www.myspace.com/miandlauspace>

### **PRODUCER - MISHA JAARI**

Misha Jaari has worked in several production companies since graduation from Aalto University's Film department in 2004. Most of the work was production management with some producer credits. Since 2007 Misha has been Bufo's CEO and fulltime producer.



### **PRODUCER - MARK LWOFF**

Mark Lwoff is probably one of Finland's most experienced first assisting directors and production managers. As one of Bufo's founders, he now concentrates to become the biggest producer in Finland. Marks length is almost two meters.



### **PRODUCER - ELLI TOIVONIEMI EIII**

Elli Toivoniemi has worked in the production team of many Finnish feature films, commercials and TV-productions, e.g. as a line producer and as an assistant director. The Good Son is Toivoniemi's first feature film as a producer.



## **A word from the producer**

### **ELLI TOIVONIEMI: "I didn't want to miss out on the energy and the attitude displayed in the script"**

When Zaida Bergroth asked me to produce her film, I did not hesitate for one second. Our starting point was to shoot the film the following summer, one way or the other. The project had not only a director I admired, but also a good script and the kind of energy and attitude I definitely did not want to miss. As a first-time producer of a feature film, I felt like I'd won the lottery.

Zaida Bergroth wanted to try out new ways of working and production. The basis was the script: it was well thought-out, but also gave room to try out different approaches.

From the start, the production was very much focused on the actors and story, and we didn't want to slow it down and add pressure with complicated production and financing issues. Luckily we found the right people who believed in the film, and just the right, courageous production company – Bufo.

I hope that the viewers can feel the candid daredevil attitude of the production.

I am very proud and happy to have produced The Good Son.

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