

# 'A Good Wife': Film Review

 [hollywoodreporter.com/review/a-good-wife-film-review-863300](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/a-good-wife-film-review-863300)

## Serbian actress and erstwhile Kusturica muse Mirjana Karanovic tries her hand at directing.

An unassuming Serbian spouse and mother in her fifties is confronted with literal and metaphorical cancers in *A Good Wife* (*Dobra Zena*), the directorial debut from Serbian actress Mirjana Karanovic. Though it might risk being confused with the similarly titled, Julianna Margulies-starring TV series in the English-speaking world, it's otherwise an apt moniker. Firstly, because the female protagonist's increasingly ambiguous relationship with her husband is at the heart of the material, but also because it manages to slightly distance this film, in which Karanovic also stars, from two of her most famous roles; she played mothers to children with (largely) absent fathers in both Palme d'Or winner *When Father Was Away on Business* and Golden Bear winner *Grbavica*. Karanovic's mostly subdued drama is ably performed and though its central cancer metaphor isn't exactly subtle, it's refreshing to see a female perspective from a region whose cinema is largely dominated by male voices.

As an actress, Karanovic has played Serbians as well as Croatians and Bosnians, including a memorable supporting turn as a Wahhabi Muslim woman in *On the Path* from Bosnian director Jasmila Zbanic (who also directed *Grbavica* and who is credited as a co-producer here). Karanovic's quiet intelligence and innate humanity have been an asset in many of her roles and her debut in the director's chair displays similar qualities.

*A Good Wife* is the kind of film that wouldn't go down well with its male protagonist, Vlada (Boris Isakovic). Initially, he seems to be a decent — if far from perfect — husband to Karanovic's Milena, even though there's clearly a rift between him and the couple's eldest daughter, Natasha (Hristina Popovic). Her more nuanced ideas about the war in which her father fought as a paramilitary leader are unacceptable to the chauvinistic Vlada, though since she doesn't live at home anymore, it's not an immediate problem for him. Milena, however, still feels responsible for her adult daughter and tries to have a normal relationship with her. She secretly goes to Belgrade to visit her offspring, pretending to just visit the family grave, though when she barges in on a work meeting at Natasha's home, she's the kind of mother who doesn't insist and quietly leaves instead.

Most of what Milena does, especially in the early going, seems to come from a sense of propriety. Practically everything that defines who Milena is, is related to her role as the caregiver of the family. She scrubs and cleans, looks after her kids — she also has a sports-obsessed son and a younger daughter who needs to be reminded to do her homework — and takes care of Vlada's needs, too, even in the bedroom.

When her husband's friends, all tough ex-paramilitaries like him, come around to visit, Milena gets some time around the kitchen table with their wives. However, in these scenes, there's less a sense of female solidarity or the intimate and jocular banter between real friends than the impression that these housewives are quietly comparing their lives, leading Milena to conclude she isn't doing too badly simply because her husband isn't having any affairs.

A boulder-sized pebble is thrown into this surface-calm pool of domesticity when Milena's doctor tells her she needs to get a mammogram done as soon as possible and she almost simultaneously finds an old VHS tape that, after a joyous family gathering, shows her husband involved in war-time atrocities involving unarmed Bosnian civilians. The screenplay, written by the actor-director with Stevan Filipovic and Darko Lungulov (both filmmakers who have directed the actress before), has to work overtime to avoid drawing the cancer-removal parallels too bluntly, though it mostly succeeds.

What keeps the film grounded to a large extent is Karanovic's dignified and vanity-free performance. The film sticks closely to Milena's point of view throughout as she struggles to process the information that perhaps deep down she might have suspected but that she never had any proof of (and didn't want any proof of, either). Most of the

narrative's carefully modulated shifts in thinking are suggested in straightforward and often wordless closeups of Karanovic's face and she's a master at suggesting the ripples of doubt, her character's increasingly desperate clinging to a sense of normalcy and then her growing determination to face the malignancies in her life head-on.

The couple's children are little more than outlines but that's because the film stays close to Milena and her rapport with her children isn't easy, since the goal is to raise them to be independent but it's hard for a mother to let go. There are a few quietly heartbreaking moments when she tries to open up to one of her kids but they don't seem to notice there's something on her mind. The good wife's relationship with her husband — solidly embodied by Isakovic — is an even more complex one, as he's her sole comfort and lifeline but then becomes the source of a problem she cannot ignore. There's a sense the two know each other too well and yet still doubt and question one another, which is something that obviously applies not only to their relationship but also to a Serbian's relationship with their country and past.

In terms of filmmaking, Karanovic doesn't reinvent the wheel, with cinematographer Erol Zubcevic alternating almost-fixed close-ups with handheld, twitchier movements. The piano-driven score imbues a further air of melancholic respectability.

*Production companies: This & That Production, Cineplanet, Deblokada*

*Cast: Mirjana Karanovic, Boris Isakovic, Jasna Djuricic, Bojan Navojec, Hristina Popovic, Ksenija Marinkovic*

*Director: Mirjana Karanovic*

*Screenplay: Mirjana Karanovic, Stevan Filipovic, Darko Lungulov*

*Producer: Snezana Penev*

*Executive producers: Uros Lukovac, Milena Dzambasovic, Goran Stankovic*

*Co-producers: Jasmila Zbanic, Damir Ibrahimovic, Sinisa Juricic, Igor Vranjkovic*

*Director of photography: Erol Zubcevic*

*Production designer: Nenad Markovic*

*Costume designer: Boris Caksiran*

*Editor: Lazar Predojevic*

*Music: Dejan Pejovic*

*Sales: Films Boutique*

*No rating, 93 minutes*