

Collective

This documentary about ingrained corruption in contemporary Romania is a wonder: a meticulously crafted landmark of investigative journalism, done in the spirit of the great 2015 film “Spotlight,” except it is real

The title (“*Colectiv*” in Romanian) comes from the name of an underground nightclub in Bucharest, that, in October 2015, burned to the ground in a fire, killing 25 patrons and leaving 180 wounded. As if the fire deaths were not bad enough, 37 of the burn victims died of infections in the aftermath in city hospitals, causing a scandal and national protests against a sketchy drug supplier (Hexi Pharma) and a corrupt regime. By early 2016, director Alexander Nauau and his crew began covering the wide-ranging scandal and the government’s response, tracing the hospital deaths to diluted disinfectants (watered down by 90 percent) from Hexi Pharma to treat burn victims.

The scandal keeps expanding, led by a crusading journalist Catalin Tolotan, a Romanian-German reporter from the “Sports Gazette” newspaper, who leads a team to root out the truth through persistent inquiry, street smarts, and shoe leather. The paper’s reporters, with the help of betrayed whistle blowers, reveal the chemical company’s nefariousness, harass government spokesmen, find dirty money used as payouts, and do dogged research to parcel out the story over many months. Their pressure is enough to topple a government, leading to calls for reform and a new election.

While the journalistic story is fascinating (and repellent), equally telling is the appearance of another truth-teller, a new interim Minister of Health (Vlad Voiculescu) who comes from Vienna with credentials in patients’ rights cases. His transparency is stunning, and he allows the Gazette team into his confidence, allowing them to film his staff meetings and sit in on whistle blowers’ testimony as he works to put together a case for prosecution. This is the kind of backstory to corruption that is rarely seen in cinema.

The film outlines in great detail the tenacious labor of Nauau (his own cinematographer) and his collaborators: the reporters filmed steadily from early 2016 to mid-2017, they took another year-and-one-half to edit and polish the documentary.

The style may remind fans of the works of the legendary Frederick Wiseman: no interviews, no voice over explaining things, no suggestive music track. Just the bald presence of the all-seeing camera whose images are precisely cut to slowly reveal the shame of a society.

“Collective” showcases a number of fascinating characters, none more striking than Tedy Ursuleani, a survivor of the fire left with harrowing burns. Posing in dramatic couture outfits while still showing her wounds, she embraces her shattered self as a symbol of the Collective horror.

(The film is not rated and runs 109 mins.)

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