

# Fine Dead Girls (Fine mrtve djevojke)

Croatia | 2002 | 77 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Dalibor Matanic
<b>Screenplay</b>	Dalibor Matanic Mate Matic
<b>Photography</b>	Branko Linta
<b>Music</b>	Jura Ferina Pavle Miholjević

## Cast

<b>Iva</b>	Olga Pakalovic
<b>Marija</b>	Nina Violec
<b>Daniel</b>	Kresimir Mikic
<b>Gazdarica Olga</b>	Inge Appelt

Iva and Marija, a lesbian couple, rent an apartment in a seemingly quiet building in Zagreb, but what initially appears as a safe love haven quickly turns into a nightmare. A winner of the Best Croatian Film Award, *Fine Dead Girls* has been named one of the best Croatian movies of the last decade, and garnered much attention due to its controversial, provocative themes.

As Croatia emerges as the destination of choice for western Europeans (and some Americans) looking for a little “undiscovered” sand and sun, it doesn’t hurt to remember just why this gorgeous country has been off the radar for so long. The tragic Civil War that plagued the Balkans resonates, leaving profound scars, both physical and psychological, upon the region.

As with any form of ethnic clash, no one really wins when things are “resolved” – even more so than with other forms of war, the reduction of civil conflict to any simplified good/bad or us/them organizing principle is a fool’s errand. As Croatia bravely rebuilds, both materially and spiritually, its people struggle to confront the gravity of their

recent history, and the challenge of their reemergence into the global community.

As an allegorical treatment of such fraught social politics, first-time director Dalibor Matanic’s *Fine Dead Girls* is a fairly successful piece of work. It follows the story of two young lesbians who rent an apartment in a non-descript building in working-class Zagreb, only to discover that they have entered a kind of Sartrean hell.

Of course, they find out that there is nothing non-descript about the building once they begin to settle in – one neighbour is a prostitute with dubious morals and a sociopathic paucity of remorse; another is an elderly man who dotes on the malodorous corpse that was once his wife; upstairs lives a creepy abortionist whose lab coat is forever spotted with bloodstains; down the hall lives a former soldier who regularly beats his enfeebled wife; and the property-owner, whose love for her sexist and insecure son is rivaled only by her hatred of “cunt-lickers”, and she, along with her bored, but sympathetic husband, lords over all.

The two women hide their sexual relationship from the nosy landlady, seemingly more out of a desire for privacy than fear of being outed – but, before long, a series of ugly events begins to transpire, forcing them into the open, and into violent, horrific conflict with their hateful neighbours. As tensions rise, we begin to understand that what we are seeing is a Croatia in microcosm, a reflection of conflicts between different identities, beliefs, bloodlines, and communities. Under the cover provided by the building, we find a furious cauldron of hatred, prejudice, violence, and death, all hidden in plain view to everyone within.

Indeed, every tenant appears to know that the old man’s wife is dead, Bates-Motel-style, in his festering apartment; everyone also seems to be aware that the ex-soldier is hitting his wife; no one is under any false pretense about what the “doctor” does upstairs; and everyone is hip to the work the young lady is up to downstairs. Yet, they all let it go on, as all manner of resentment, blinding anger, and tension mounts.

When the landlady’s misogynist son sets his sights on one of the new tenants, even though he knows that she is gay, her rebuke of his advances sets off a truly catastrophic chain of events that seem to mirror the sudden, massive calamity of an outbreak of civil conflict. The apartment block is overcome by anger, danger, and murder – everything unravels, everything is laid bare. Ultimately, the many secrets all come to light, but only after rape, murder, and betrayal forever change the dynamics of the community.

Boasting nuanced, impressive performances, including a standout job by Jadranka Djokic as the gleefully mean-spirited prostitute who, in many ways, is at the centre of the film, *Fine Dead Girls* works a bit of diabolical magic on you. It is appalling, and often disgusting, but it has its reasons. As a meditation on the tragedy of a broken community, and on the viciousness of Croatia’s recent fascistic past, it is thoughtful and incisive, if unremittingly bleak.

*Stuart Henderson*

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