

Paradise is Burning [15]

2023 Sweden 108 mins

UK released	30 August 2024
Director	Mika Gustafson
Screenplay	Mika Gustafson; Alexander Ohrstrand
Cinematography	Sine Vadstrup Brooker
Music	Giorgio Giampa
Cast	Bianca Delbravo (Laura); Dilvin Asaad (Mira); Safira Mossberg (Steffi); Ida Engvoll (Hanna); Marta Oldenburg (Zara); Mitja Siren (Sasha)

During a long, hot Swedish summer, 16-year-old Laura (Bianca Delbravo) lives a seemingly carefree life partying with friends and spending afternoons at the pool — but always with her younger sisters, 12-year-old Mira (Dilvin Asaad) and 6-year-old Steffi (Safira Mossberg), in tow. In the absence of the girls' mother, Laura has become a de facto parent; a role she is ill-equipped for, despite her best intentions. When social services threaten to pay a visit, Laura resorts to desperate measures to keep her family together. There's a rawness here, and an authenticity in filmmaking and performances, that bolsters the occasional narrative weaknesses to create a film of quiet power.

This is the feature debut of Mika Gustafson, who has previously made documentaries including the similarly-themed *Mephobia* and a 2017 portrait of Swedish feminist artist Silvana Imam. Those interests converge here; *Paradise Is Burning* is a cinema vérité-style exploration of the adolescent female experience, with Gustafson coaxing strong performances from her central trio and underpinning their work with sensitive directorial choices.

Paradise Is Burning follows in the footsteps of Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows* (and more recent iterations including *Scrapper*) in its exploration of youngsters going it alone and trying to stay one step ahead of a system they know will impose unwanted change. Gustafson is careful to strike a balance between the seriousness of this situation and the girls' everyday life which, for the most part, they seem to enjoy. Their home may be messy and chaotic, but it's also happy. Delbravo, Asaad and Mossberg have a natural sibling push-pull chemistry; there's

fighting, sniping, laughter and genuine love. Intricately layered production design by Catharina Nyqvist Ehrnrooth holds a great deal in small details; smiling childhood portraits line the walls, a plethora of knick-knacks, ornaments and magnets suggest a valuable shared history amongst the peeling wallpaper and leaking fridge/freezer.

That is why, when she finds out social services will be paying a visit, Laura withholds the information from her sisters, determined to fix the situation without worrying them. It may also go some way to explaining why she sparks an unlikely bond with older local woman Hanna (Ida Engvoll). Hanna, like most of the adults on screen, is rather one-dimensional; it's hinted that she might be suffering from postnatal depression, and she is certainly unhappy with her life. The adults are seen only through the point of view of Laura and her sisters, all unable (or unwilling) to impose any traditional authority. The film finds its purpose when only the youngsters are on screen. Their bond is underscored by an energetic soundtrack and brisk editing that puts us right in the middle of this sibling maelstrom. Fittingly, given the strength of these family ties, blood forms a recurring motif, from the meat juices Steffi spreads on her face, warrior style, to create a distraction in a supermarket to the arrival of Mira's first period, celebrated — like the departure of Steffi's first baby tooth — with a euphoric ritual.

Nikki Baughan, *Screen Daily*, 7 October 2023 (abridged)

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