

Student filmmaker shares her refugee experience

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Coming to the Ojai Film Festival — which runs Oct. 31 to Nov. 10 in various locations throughout the city — is a story of a refugee fleeing the Bosnian War.

"Variables" is the name of the film, by Bosnian native Sabina Vajraca for her master of fine arts thesis at the USC School of Cinematic Arts.

It will screen Nov. 2 at 10 a.m. and Nov. 8 at 4 p.m. at the Ojai Art Center Theater, 113 S. Montgomery St., Ojai.

The film centers around the protagonist, a Bosnian refugee who finds a way out of the war zone when his math club competes at the 1995 International Math Olympiad in Canada. Vajraca combined the experiences of a friend of a friend with her own to create the film's storyline.

"I am from Bosnia myself," she said. "I came to the United States in the '90s as a war refugee. My parents ended up in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I moved to New York and now I live in L.A. But throughout, there were a lot of other Bosnian friends I met."

She said a friend of a friend told her of how he and his math club were pulled out of the war zone to compete in the 1995 International Math Olympiad. "I thought it was an incredible story," she said. "I just couldn't imagine the idea of, in the middle of the war zone, where the kids are running around trying to find food and water, there was this random thing where they just got flown out and now they're in Canada, where there's not even a mention of war."

She added that, in real life, the man who inspired her film had to return to the war after spending the week in Canada.

"I'm from Northern Bosnia, so there weren't any bombs or anything like that," Vajraca said of her own experiences. "It was sort of more psychological warfare, and concentration camps and that sort of stuff. So my parents got me out, and I ended



Image submitted

"Variables" is a film by Bosnian native Sabina Vajraca.

up kind of being on my own in Croatia as a refugee for about a year before they joined me, my mom and my brother; and my dad didn't come for a couple more years. My mom, my brother and I came to the United States as refugees in 1994."

Vajraca said she wanted to portray that experience, that doubt, of not knowing if she would ever see her parents again. She wanted to give the protagonist that aspect of her own story by keeping him in Canada after the competition was over.

A person from the USC industry relations department recommended Vajraca enter her film into the film festival and, after reading glowing reviews about it, she decided to apply. Vajraca also relished the chance to visit Ojai for the first time.

When asked about the significance of her film, Vajraca said: "I think we live in a time where the question of immigrants, and what their place is in our society, is constantly raised." As a Muslim refugee who came to the United States without means or health insurance — which the U.S. government is now requesting refugees have — "I wouldn't have been given the chance to come here," Vajraca said. "That would've

changed my life completely."

Vajraca said the film shows that the protagonist fled the country as a refugee, not out of choice, but of necessity. He simply wanted to survive, and had nowhere else to go, much like her own experience.

"Variables" has been shown at three festivals, winning Best Student Film at the Vail Film Festival. It will complete its tour at the end of next spring, at which time Vajraca said she will look into potential streaming platforms for it to run on.

"I'm trying to tell stories about my experiences, and those of my friends, and this community that not many Americans know about," Vajraca said. "But we're out there, and we exist, and we're probably your next-door neighbors, and I'd like to tell stories so that you get to know us better."

For a complete schedule of Ojai Film Festival screenings, visit [https://OjaiFilmFestival.us15.list-manage.com/join?click_id=61367025f0e8527b8641d8d1-902dd441ab2&c=7c8c781b71n_biarakojaiartcenter.com](https://ojaiartcenter.com/2021/01/01/management/2021/01/01/management/2021/01/01/management/)