

## *Mia madre* (“My Mother”)

*Mia madre* (“My Mother”) is a 2015 Italian-French drama film directed by Nanni Moretti.

It was selected to compete for the Palme d’Or at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival.

It was screened in the Special Presentations section of the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

### Cast

Margherita Buy as Margherita  
John Turturro as Barry Huggins  
Giulia Lazzarini as Ada  
Nanni Moretti as Giovanni  
Beatrice Mancini as Livia  
Stefano Abbati as Federico  
Enrico Ianniello as Vittorio  
Anna Bellato as Actor  
Toni Laudadio as Producer

Awards and nominations			
Award	Category	Recipients and nominees	Result
70th Silver Ribbon Awards	Best Director	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Producer	Nanni Moretti and Domenico Procacci	Nominated
	Best Screenplay	Nanni Moretti, Valia Santella, and Francesco Piccolo	Nominated
	Best Actress	Margherita Buy	Won
	Best Editing	Clelio Benevento	Nominated
	Best Sound	Alessandro Zanon	Nominated
	Special Nastro d'Argento	Giulia Lazzarini	Won
68th Cannes Film Festival	Palme d'Or	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Prize of the Ecumenical Jury		Won
60th David di Donatello Awards <sup>[6]</sup>	Best Film	Nanni Moretti and Domenico Procacci	Nominated
	Best Director	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Script	Nanni Moretti, Valia Santella and Francesco Piccolo	Nominated
	Best Producer	Nanni Moretti and Domenico Procacci	Nominated
	Best Actress	Margherita Buy	Won

Awards and nominations			
Award	Category	Recipients and nominees	Result
	Best Supporting Actress	Giulia Lazzarini	Won
	Best Supporting Actor	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Makeup	Enrico Iacoponi	Nominated
	Best Editing	Clelio Benevento	Nominated
	Best Sound	Alessandro Zanon	Nominated
55th Globi d'oro	Best Film	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Script	Nanni Moretti, Valia Santella, and Francesco Piccolo	Nominated
	Best Actress	Margherita Buy	Nominated
30th Ciak d'oro	Best Director	Nanni Moretti	Won
	Best Actress	Margherita Buy	Won
	Best Supporting Actor	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Supporting Actress	Giulia Lazzarini	Won
	Best Producer	Nanni Moretti and Domenico Procacci	Nominated
	Best Screenwriter	Nanni Moretti, Valia Santella, and Francesco Piccolo	Nominated
	Best Sets and Decorations	Paola Bizzarri	Nominated
	Best Movie Poster	Internozero comunicazione	Nominated
28th European Film Awards	Best Director	Nanni Moretti	Nominated
	Best Actress	Margherita Buy	Nominated

**Nanni Moretti** is one of the key makers of the modern personal cinema, as in such masterworks as *Caro Diario*. He even served as one of the founders of the mode, when, in the early seventies, around the age of twenty, he made movies on his own, starring himself, using Super-8 film. But in his new film, *Mia Madre*, he is making a movie about a filmmaker while playing a supporting role and yet telling a story that is something more than a work of personal cinema, it's a virtual manifesto for it, an effort to grasp the very motive for his art.

Over the years Moretti has satirized Berlusconi (*Il Caimano / The Caiman*, 2006) and the institution of the papacy (*Habemus Papam / We Have a Pope*, 2011), but his biggest successes have been his emotional dramas, including *La stanza del figlio / The Son's Room* (2001) and *Mia Madre / My mother* (2015).

## **The reality / the background of the film:**

Moretti wrote the screenplay following the death of his mother (who, like Ada, was a beloved classical languages teacher for many years). That the film reflects the director-screenwriter's personal state of mind is clear. That Margherita represents him is not quite so obvious, though it's easy to see fragments of Moretti's real life sprinkled throughout her character. At one point, Margherita is asked at a press conference if her film will appeal to the public's conscience in today's world. While the director gives a pat answer, in her mind the subtitles "reply": "Everybody thinks that I have the knack of understanding what is going on, of interpreting reality. But I don't understand anything anymore."

(Along the way, Moretti offers a quietly harsh view of the Italian medical establishment, as he did in "Caro Diario.")

## **Storyline**

**Margherita (Margherita Buy)** is a director working on a social-realist film about a factory strike called *Noi siamo qui (We Are Here)*, starring American actor Barry Huggins (John Turturro) as the factory owner. Huggins consistently fails to deliver his lines properly and the agitated nature of the shoot is exacerbated by unhelpful advice from Margherita to her actors. She breaks up with her boyfriend, an actor in the film, and is divorced from the father of her daughter, Livia (Beatrice Mancini). Her brother **Giovanni (Nanni Moretti)** has taken time off work to help care for their mother, Ada (Giulia Lazzarini), a retired classics teacher who has been hospitalised. Margherita comes to feel guilty for not taking on more responsibility for her mother and reflects on her often cold relations with her family, friends and colleagues.

## **How does the film begin?**

Ada is already in the hospital when the story begins. (the character is based on Mr. Moretti's own mother.) Initially, Margherita seems more concerned about her movie than about Ada's health — or so it seems. *Mia Madre* opens on a tense scene of a group of striking workers squaring off against the riot police outside a factory gate. At that point, it isn't clear that this is the movie Margherita is shooting.

The first time Margherita appears, she's running over to the clashing protesters and police officers, a mass of agitated action. She calls cut and then calls out a camera operator, critiquing his approach. She doesn't like the way he shot the riot; he insists that his way allows viewers to get "into" the scene. "I don't want them into it," Margherita replies.

## **Characters**

**Margherita Buy** stars as Margherita, a film director currently working on a movie about factory workers who strike to protest the austerity plans of their new owner. As she tries to hold production together, her personal life is confused. She has just broken up with her partner, her teenage daughter is pulling away from her, and doctors tell her that her hospitalized mother doesn't have long to live.

The interplay between reality and film – the film is possibly the art that best mimics the real world and this has always been of interest to Moretti. But while his concerns are serious, his touch is always light, with humor never far from the surface. **John Turturro** co-stars in what at first appears to be comic relief, a pompous American movie star hired to appear in Margherita’s film, but his concerns operate as a sort of funhouse reflection of hers. **Moretti** plays Margherita’s brother, who is also struggling with the impending loss of their mother.

*Mia Madre* moves easily between the present tense, memories, and dreams to engage us with Margherita’s uncertain relation to her life and labor. Moretti’s touch is so sure that the movie often seems to be less than it is, but by the time it’s over you might be surprised to find how much it has affected you.

### **Love, loss and moviemaking — what more could you ask for in a film?**

*Mia Madre* has all that, and more. If you have ever lost a close relative, you know about the almost-surreal nature of trying to go about your everyday life while watching someone else’s, someone you care about. Director and co-writer Nanni Moretti captures the absurd humor and tragedy of the situation perfectly — this is one of those films in which you feel like you’ve known the characters for years. Moretti and his actors establish a kind of instant **empathy**.

**The central character** is a director making a difficult film. The director is Margherita (Margherita Buy), whose film, about workers preparing to strike in a factory in Rome, requires complicated set-ups and lots of extras and one egotistical actor whose opinion of himself greatly outpaces the opinion others have of him. makes the story all the more affecting. That’s Turturro, of course, playing an actor named Barry, who gets off the plane and tries immediately to seduce Margherita, who isn’t sure he even knows she’s the director. (“I was kidding!” he says, once he finds out.)

Margherita’s mother, Ada (Giulia Lazzarini), has a heart problem that won’t respond to treatment. Margherita’s brother, Giovanni, played by Moretti himself, has taken a leave of absence from his job to stay with her at the hospital, a stark contrast to the always-distracted Margherita, who is also dealing with a break-up and a teenage daughter, among other things.

Moretti moves back and forth between those things, as well as Margherita’s thoughts and dreams and past, fluidly. Margherita’s life would be tough enough to manage without the shadow of her mother’s illness dominating over everything else.

### **The film Margherita is directing, what is it about?**

The film, called “*Noi Siamo Qui*,” or “*We Are Here*,” is a heavy political drama. It’s meant to be, anyway, and probably will be when it’s finished, but in the meantime we see Margherita struggling to get her camera operator to cooperate, setting up the equipment to shoot a conversation in a moving car and, most difficult of all, handling Barry. Turturro is terrific, falsely humble for about five seconds a day until he doesn’t get his way. He brags of imaginary work with Stanley Kubrick (“He never worked with Kubrick,” Margherita tells someone quietly), explodes in blame and rage when he can’t remember lines (which is often) and complains that his fake mustache makes his lip itch. Yet he is capable of moments in which he is a better man, able to relate on a more-down-to-

earth level. *Mia Madre*, then, shows us the dark humor in illness, the ridiculous requirements of making great art, the real life we experience beyond the images we see.

### **Which are the techniques about making a movie used by the director Margherita?**

In director Nanni Moretti's telling, the director Margherita (Margherita Buy) always tells her actors to stand a little apart from their characters, so that she can see both. There is a reason for this, and it gradually becomes clear to both Margherita and the viewer as both her mother and her latest film.

### **Which are the problems that Margherita has to handle?**

The filmmaker is Margherita (played by veteran Italian actress Margherita Buy), who doesn't quite know what to make of Barry Huggins (Turturro) from the moment she picks him up at the Rome airport and he falls asleep in her car (he dreams Kevin Spacey wants to kill him in a hilarious passage).

In fact, Margherita doesn't quite know what to make of much in her life. Struggling to hold it together as she directs cast and crew, Margherita is also dealing with the impending death of her mother Ada (Giulia Lazzarini), whom she obviously adores; the breakup of her romance with the actor Vittorio (Enrico Ianniello), and her relationships with her brother Giovanni (the filmmaker Moretti, pulling double duty here) and her daughter Livia (Beatrice Mancini).

Margherita also suffers from waking nightmares (in a few instances they are more distracting than interesting) and emotional tantrums (both internally and externally) that are poised to rip her in two. But this is not a weak woman by any means. **Moretti has crafted a Margherita who is strong and determined.** That's not to say she does not have her "moments" — the explosive passage involving Margherita and her location crew filming a driving sequence with Barry (Turturro is beyond priceless in the scene).

### **How does Margherita succeed to manage the situation?**

Margherita is inattentive, or perhaps too afraid, to come to terms with her precarious emotional state. "You think you're attentive, but you don't see what's around you," Vittorio lectures her. And that's because, as her brother Giovanni finally makes her realize, she just stopped listening. Is that her salvation mechanism, the only way to avoid a total nervous breakdown? Well, yes, but in a way, the breakdown has already occurred. As she is fond of telling her actors (who never understand the puzzling directive), "Play the character... and stand next to the character."

### **Which is the drama of the film?**

The drama of the film is the drama of attempting to make a film while facing life—and of attempting to live something like a normal life while making a movie. Moretti leaps beyond the mere daily practicalities of Margherita's life, filling the movie with Margherita's memories, fantasies, and introspective. He slips gracefully in and out of time frames and reality frames and rendering her dreams with an insinuatingly quiet power that's amplified by their unexaggerated practical naturalism. As Margherita works, her mind, under the power of emotions, takes over:

- while she's doing a press conference to promote the film, she's overwhelmed both by the vanity and banality of the discussion and by her irrepressible thoughts about her mother
- while she's home doing laundry, she recalls the near-catastrophe of the last time her mother drove a car—and her own decisively vehement response to the situation.

Mr. Moretti shifts among Margherita's different states of consciousness — reveries and reminiscences. Moretti directly cuts from states of awareness to something else, which means that you don't immediately know if it's a new day, a dream or a memory. In one such interlude, when Margherita walks along a line of people waiting to see Wim Wenders's "Wings of Desire," the crowd snaking around the block, it looks like an ordinary night until Margherita sees her mother and then sees her own younger self.

**The subject—key among the actors in the movie is Barry:**

- the actor who plays the American entrepreneur, a minor Hollywood star, an Italian-American named Barry Huggins. Barry is played by John Turturro. Turturro portrays Huggins as a monster of vanity, a legend in his own eyes whose tall tales about working with Stanley Kubrick are matched by his difficulty learning his lines, and who boasts loudly about his selfless love of the art form while turning with contempt on Margherita, her project, and his own profession of acting when things go wrong on the set. Yet, when it's Barry's birthday, the cast and crew throw him a little party on set, complete with festive music—and Barry's costumer, a flamboyantly lively middle-aged woman, ropes him into a spontaneous dance that turns Margherita's film into a virtual musical and brings out the energies that are repressed in the making of her movie.

Moretti's depiction of the absurdly mechanical complexities of a big-budget shoot is funny, too, in parallel with the irritations of Barry's fake mustache and his difficulty with Italian pronunciation to the bizarre artifices of filming actors in a moving car. While filming a violent confrontation between striking workers and the riot police, Margherita challenges her director of photography on his camera moves, wondering whether—when he films police violence—he's on the side of the police or the strikers. Margherita directs her actors with a sublime bit of advice that confuses them, but which pops into the film, repeatedly, as a stroke of Moretti's own genius and even as the secret of his own art: she tells one actress to "stay a little bit to the side" and explains, "I'd like to see the actress. Next to the character, I'd like to see the actress who plays her. You mustn't disappear as a person."

Moretti's in the movie, too; he gives himself the supporting role of Margherita's brother, Giovanni (which is Moretti's actual first name), and plays him as an aesthete of reserved and exquisite diction who prefers idleness to work and takes full advantage of his mother's illness to devote himself both to her and to his own spectrum of emotions. Giovanni's art of living—of passionate attention, devoted contemplation, and decisive resignation—appears close to Moretti's own. As for Giovanni and Margherita's mother, Ada, she is both adored by the siblings and yet seemingly unknown to them—and visits from her former students ultimately reveal to Margherita and Giovanni their mother's secret grandeur. Those students speak of her as no mere scholar or even simply a devoted teacher; rather, as one visitor says, "She danced with us. . . . To us, she was like a mom; she taught us life even more than the other subjects."

Moretti fills the movie with painful **separations**—Giovanni’s, of his life from work; Margherita’s, of her work from her life; Ada’s, of her Latin teaching from her life-teaching; even Barry’s, of his talent from his personality.

Moretti doesn’t draw a line between laughter and sorrow. Instead, he moves between registers and layers of emotion, slipping heavy moments into playful encounters and revealing the tender humor in an otherwise melancholic scene.

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