



FLOPHOUSE AMERICA

a film by
Monica Strømdahl

Norway, The Netherlands, USA | 2025 | 78 min.

PRESS NOTES

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

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Mikal (12) is born and raised in the rundown hotel room he shares with his parents, both struggling with alcohol addiction. Mikal's biggest wish is for his mum and dad to stop drinking.

But what does it take for someone to truly change their ways?

Logline



Synopsis

Due to the ongoing housing crisis in the U.S., many people are forced to live in run-down hotels, known as flophouses. Twelve-year-old Mikal shares a small, inexpensive room in one of these hotels with his parents and their cat, Smokey. Their home is marked by chaos and alcohol abuse, but also by love and the hope for a better future.

Director Monica Strømdahl has spent years traveling across the U.S., documenting life in these hotels. Eight years ago, she met Mikal, one of many children growing up in this environment. This coming-of-age documentary follows him over three years, capturing the pain of a fractured childhood alongside the warmth and complexity of family.



Director's note

In 2005, as a photography student in need of cheap accommodation, I checked into a run-down hotel in New York. There, I met a community of people who relied on affordable housing but were shut out of the traditional housing market. For years, that small hotel, with its tiny, windowless rooms, became their home.

I returned year after year with my camera, living there for months at a time, and the people I met became my friends. When the hotel was shut down due to gentrification in 2013, its tenants were forced out, leaving behind a deep sense of loss and injustice. This experience drove me to document the ongoing housing crisis and the lives of those living in hotels and motels across the US. I called the project Flophouse America.

In 2017, in a hotel lobby, I met Mikal. An 11-year-old boy, raised in the hotel and in the crossfire between poverty and addiction. Meeting Mikal and his family made me realize photography wasn't enough to capture their story. I wanted to give them space to speak, to move, to show the complexities of their lives beyond still images. And so the 15 year photography project transitioned into film.

Flophouse America might be a trigger to watch. It is important to remember the vast number of children who live in the same circumstances as Mikal, and the importance of raising awareness about poverty and parental addiction in order to make change. Children like Mikal

face intertwined challenges, including unmet basic needs, emotional trauma, educational barriers, social stigma, and systemic inequities. Overcoming these obstacles requires access to strong support networks, resilience-building opportunities, and comprehensive community and policy interventions.

I wanted to give a voice to children like Mikal, for them to feel seen, empowered and represented. By offering a real insight to the problem, we might have a chance to make a difference.

Through making this film, my relationship with Mikal and his family evolved into something personal and meaningful. The trust between us allowed Mikal to set clear boundaries in the shoots. Some days, he was eager to be filmed and wear a mic—on others, he made it clear he wanted space. Between shoots, when I was in Norway, we would keep each other updated on everyday life topics.

When Mikal's mother Tonya passed away, I was one of the first people Mikal reached out to. In those initial days of shock and grief, we spoke daily. The process of filmmaking naturally stopped. 10 months later, Mikal and his father Jason invited me back to film Tonya's funeral, as they saw it as a necessary last chapter for the film. This to me was a profound moment of trust.

Since then, I have helped Mikal set up long-term therapy with a counselor who has become an integral part of his support system. They've developed a strong relationship, and she now assists him with navigating job applications and educational systems, providing guidance that extends beyond traditional therapy. She is also helping him prepare for the film's release and

the reality that his life story will soon be public. The same applies to Jason. I have arranged therapy for him as well, and we are continuously working to build a support network for them within their local community.

To this day, Mikal, Jason and I talk regularly. Our connection will continue after the film premieres, and for as long as we all find it natural and meaningful.

Visual approach

Flophouse America exposes the everyday consequences of a global crisis. Through unique access to Mikal and his family, we saw an opportunity to highlight both the personal and societal impact of rising poverty and social inequality.

Filmed in a purely observational style, the documentary strives for authenticity. Shooting alone allowed me to create an intimate, non-intrusive environment, with all action unfolding naturally in front of a static camera. The carefully composed, long, static shots contrast sharply with the raw and often unsettling reality of the family's life. Relying solely on available light influenced both framing and camera placement, blurring the distinction between day and night, reflecting the family's irregular routines as they create their own sense of time.

At its core, **Flophouse America** is a film about fractured childhoods, social inheritance, and inequality, but also about hope and the dream of a better future.



Producer's note

Whilst filming Mikal and the family, our responsibilities as fellow humans, and a film team were huge. In **Flophouse America**, we see a family in unfortunate and sometimes compromising situations. From the beginning, they believed that sharing their story and showing their life situation is important. They wanted to show the impact of a life characterized by addiction and poverty, hoping it will get global attention and bring about change in society.

We share this desire and motivation with our protagonists and have been continuously in touch with Mikal and his father Jason, especially considering Mikal's age, characterized by rapid changes and sensitivities, while at the same time assessing what it will mean for him and his family to be featured on screen. Because of Mikal's young age during the making of this film, we decided to wait until Mikal turned 18 - which he did in July 2024 - before launching this film. All participants have continuously given their consent, and Mikal and his father have seen the film several times and approved it.

Whilst I think many will agree there is great room for improvement in Mikal's upbringing, we have always thought it vital to portray all members of this family with dignity. When people in a vulnerable situation expose themselves during the process of filmmaking, they become our responsibility. And so we always had a care plan for this project. During the production, the film crew was in constant communications with (mental) health care professionals and child welfare, helping us deal with both the subject matter of the film as well as the protagonists in a

professional and suitable way. We have provided both Mikal and Jason with psychologists, also outside the film's production, who in addition to being traditional personal therapists also have been preparing them for any media exposure.

We have continuously been there for Mikal and Jason and will keep doing so in the future, attending to their needs. Since our last shooting day, Monica has been in weekly contact with Mikal and Jason. They have established a close relationship that will last the rest of our lives.

Beathe Hofseth & Siri Natvik - Fri Film



Monica Strømdahl (director) is an international award-winning documentary stills photographer graduated from Falmouth College of Arts.

In 2019, she won the 1st prize at the Norwegian Picture of The Year, and was nominated for the Leica Oscar Barnack Award (LOBA). Monica is known for her intimate way of portraying people and their lives.

She has made short films, and **Flophouse America** is her debut feature film.

About the team





Beathe Hofseth (producer), CEO in Fri Film, has produced award winning documentaries, such as **Light Fly, Fly High WP** and awarded at IDFA, **Labours of Love** (2019) and **Seventh Grade** (2019) awarded at Chicago International Children's Film Festival and **The Golden Swan** (2025). Beathe has participated in Berlinale Talents (2019), CineKid (2020), EuroDoc (2021) and EAVE (2023).

Siri Natvik (producer), partner and producer in Fri Film. With experience from documentary directing, film dissemination, teaching and programming, Siri holds an MA in Journalism and a BA in Animation and Documentary film studies. Siri has produced films as **The Golden Swan** (2025), **Oxygen** (2025) and **Labours of Love** (2019).





Eline van Wees and her company Basalt Film (NL) (co-producer) has for the last ten years made over 20 documentaries for the international market. Basalt Film is NAPA and DAE member. The company is behind A-listed festival films such as **To the Moon and Back** (2019), **Life is a Dream** (2020), **Carrousel** (2019), **Good Neighbours** (2018), **Dreaming Walls** (2023) and **A Want in Her** (2024).

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

David Sutherland (US), **The Farmers Wife, Country Boys, Out of Sight**
Joshua Seftel and Eric Nicols in Smartypants (US), Oscar nomination for **Stranger at the Gate**

About Fri Film

FRI FILM is a production company established in 2012, based in Oslo, Norway, driven by two female filmmakers. They focus on creative feature length documentaries with an international potential. In **FRI FILM** they believe that film can make a difference. They are especially engaged in topics such as human rights, discrimination, and gender equality, and are looking for strong, personal, character driven stories, made into creative features. They always aim to portray stories with visual artistry and aesthetic expression. Their goal is to make documentaries that reflect the world we live in and make people see their lives in a new perspective.

PREVIOUS WORK

Light Fly, Fly High, documentary feature (2013) (WP IDFA)

[WATCH TRAILER](#)

Labours of Love, documentary series (2019)

Seventh Grade, documentary series (2019) [WATCH TEASER](#)

Source of Life, documentary feature (2025)

The company has produced award-winning documentaries such as **Light Fly, Fly high** which premiered at IDFA and has been screened at more than 80 festivals around the world. The film received several international awards, such as the **One World Media Documentary Award**, the **Oxfam Global Justice Award** and the **Amanda Award** for Best Documentary in 2014. Their latest productions include **Labours of Love** (2019) and **Seventh Grade** (2019) which won an award at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival.

IN PRODUCTION

The Golden Swan, documentary feature (2025)

Oxygen, short fiction (2025)

IN DEVELOPMENT

Yoga for Gangsters, documentary, feature (2027)

Credits

Director/DOP/writer Monica Strømdahl
Editor/co-writer Siv Lamark
Producer Beathe Hofseth and Siri Natvik, Fri Film (NO)
Co-producer Eline van Wees, Basalt Film (NL)
Executive producer David Sutherland (US)
Executive producer Joshua Seftel and Eric Nicols,
Smarty pants (US)
Composer Andreas Ihlebæk and Marius Troy
Sound designer Mark Glynne and Olmo van Straalen,
Anthill Sound Design
Colorist Tom Chr. Lilletvedt, Hinterland
Cinema Distribution NO Linn Barholt, Norsk Filmdistribusjon
Cinema Distribution NL Daan Vermeulen, Cinema Delicatessen

Credits

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Hot Docs
Doc Norway



