

## INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA WOODWORTH



Jessica Woodworth © Jean-Luce Huré

CO-DIRECTOR OF “THE BAREFOOT EMPEROR”,  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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“THE BAREFOOT EMPEROR”, WHICH WAS LAUNCHED IN TORONTO AND WHICH WILL BE GOING TO MANY OTHER FESTIVALS AROUND THE WORLD SOON – IS THE SEQUEL TO YOUR FIRST COMEDY, “KING OF THE BELGIANS”, THAT WAS LAUNCHED AT THE VENICE FESTIVAL IN 2016 AND TURNED OUT TO BE A MAJOR SUCCESS ON THE INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL CIRCUIT. THAT’S EVEN MORE REMARKABLE SINCE THE COMEDY GENRE IN GENERAL REMAINS LIMITED TO A NATIONAL AUDIENCE.

“King of the Belgians” was deeply appreciated in very different environments, from Iran to Brazil, from South Africa to Sweden. It screened at about 100 festivals (including eight opening nights) and won quite a few awards. I think part of it has to do with the nature of the film. It’s very gentle and not at all cynical. That’s maybe something people miss a little bit. And also the story is somehow believable.

The distribution was pretty limited but the film worked well, for example, in Italy. Some Italians said it reminded them of their comedies of the 1950s. We had solid releases in Bulgaria and Holland. In Belgium we distrib-

uted the film ourselves even though this was not the plan. Belgian distributors didn’t know how to identify the target audience and how to place the film in the market. It was a film that maybe fell between two Belgian stools. We were also told it was not anti-royalist enough for some Flemish viewers and too anti-royalist for some Walloons. Outside Belgium we heard the film improved the image of our kingdom. I suppose our royals didn’t see it that way. We only got a big fat silence from the palace.

YOU HAVE CREATED VERY TOUCHING CHARACTERS WHO ALL HAVE SOMETHING THAT GOES BEYOND STEREOTYPES.

Of course we’re juggling with stereotypes. We didn’t want to shy away from it because you simply can’t. I mean, in “King of the Belgians” you have a European king, you have Turkey, you have Atatürk, a Serbian sniper, Bulgarian folklore singers, a yoghurt festival, an Albanian jail, *rakia* – all very complicated stuff to cook together. So convincing everyone to come on board with body, heart and soul took a lot of time. People were very cautious about how the image of their re-

gion was going to be projected on screen. They're tired of stereotypes. But somehow this one character in the centre of the story – the king – pulled it all together emotionally.

We shot chronologically and often with local people, so there's a freshness and authenticity. It was mostly scripted but some of it was improvised. For example, the barefoot Bulgarian village mayor is not only the real mayor of his village, but he really showed up on set barefoot and burst out in hilarious unscripted monologues. We were very open-minded and invited this kind of wonderful situation. Our crew sometimes got a bit confused because our working method is not at all traditional for making fiction. But when you have all your doors and windows open, magic can happen.

You catch unexpected vistas of the human condition. If you're listening.



Jessica Woodworth and Peter Brosens on set

**A SEQUEL IS CERTAINLY A TEMPTATION AFTER A SUCCESS, BUT OF COURSE ALSO A RISK. DID YOU THOROUGHLY WEIGH THE PROS AND CONS BEFORE DECIDING TO MAKE A SEQUEL?**

We never would have imagined wanting to do a sequel. What a dorky thought. This was really never the plan. But just a week before our world premiere in Venice, by pure chance we ended up on Tito's island in Croatia, just for a day. It's such a peculiar and fascinating place where nothing fits together. There was also an important trigger. On the last day shooting "King of the Belgians" we did a scene in Sarajevo where the king was accidentally shot by a Belgian sniper. Near the end of the editing process (nine months) we realised that the film was not supposed to end like that and so

we dumped this climactic scene.

On Tito's island we had this thunderous moment. It was obvious that our business with the king was not finished. It became obvious that this Sarajevo scene could launch a new story – the king is shot in the ear by this Belgian sniper and he wakes up on Tito's island.

The intention was never to recycle anything from "King of the Belgians". We wanted to change our tactic and make a political satire without the constraints of a mockumentary. When you shoot a mockumentary you have to stay within the framework and the logic of it. It meant a lot of borders that we couldn't cross in order to sustain the credibility of the story. Now we were freed from that.

The fact that the king is shot in the ear also invites a special handling of sound, which is so important to us.

The king hears things through a strange prism. It was also obvious that our host of characters were the perfect vehicle to look at the volatile political situation in Europe. And we feel a sense of responsibility. As filmmakers we are financed with public money, so we want to try to contribute to public discourse in an intelligent way. We feel there's even more of a need today for films that hold up mirrors and help us to look at ourselves in new light.

There are a lot of figures in "The Barefoot Emperor" that suggest the cyclical nature of history and remind us that dictators come and go. The film is pregnant with historical references.

But it's not supposed to be a patronising history lesson and we're certainly not proposing any remedy for a Europe that inclines too far to the right, in our view.

Everything happens on the island in the space of three days. These very precise limitations in the dramaturgy gave us our freedom. And in a certain way, our visual language is going back to the rigorous *mise en scène* of our earlier films, a way of crafting that we were missing.

**YOU SAID EARLIER THAT THE ISLAND WAS A VERY PECULIAR PLACE. DOES THE LANDSCAPE PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN "THE BAREFOOT EMPEROR"?**

Very unexpectedly, the landscape plays hardly any role at all for the very simple reason that we didn't feel it

needed to. But it's a landscape filled with a lot of funky things that were brought in from other climates and ecosystems. Everything feels sort of out of place. Many plants and animals there were gifts for Tito. There is a giraffe, a llama, ostriches, etc. Indira Gandhi brought two elephants for Tito and one is still alive there. Tito's parrot, Koki, who is world famous, appears in the film. People flock to see Koki. He squawks very politically incorrect things all the time. Just great. The other animal in our story is a llama that ends up with a very dark destiny. The sounds of nature actually give a more telling indication of nature's role. Nature is almost indifferent to us humans and the absolute mess we can make of things. But the birds do quieten down at one point and are transcended by the creepy drone of insects.

### IF THE LANDSCAPE DOESN'T PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE, HOW COME THAT THE VISIT TO THIS ISLAND HAS TRIGGERED THE SEQUEL TO THE "KING OF THE BELGIANS"?

The timing was perfect. Europe is very fragile right now. The way people are voting, the fact that people are so quick to fear and to hate is alarming. On top of that there was the fortuitous circumstances of finding ourselves on an island that was completely unknown to us. It's a fantastic stage, full of true stories which we exploit and which unveil many lessons of history. Gaddafi, Haile Selassie, Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Yasser Arafat all visited Tito there. And before that it was a resort for the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy. Even Franz Ferdinand was there shortly before his death. All those elements are woven into the film but it should remain accessible to an audience that doesn't know all this history, especially via the humour. But you never know. Humour is so specific, so subjective and personal. Speaking of humour, you have to be brutally honest with yourself in the writing and especially honest during the shooting. You have to trust in your gut instinct. Members of the crew don't know what you see through the frame, neither the timing you're imagining nor the dimensions of sound that will be sculpted in post-production. Your partners have to really have faith in you.

### EXAGGERATION IS A VERY COMMON TECHNIQUE OF COMEDY. ISN'T IT CHILLING FOR YOU TO SEE HOW QUICK POLITICAL REALITY IS CATCHING UP WITH

### WHAT YOU HAD CONCEIVED AS A SATIRE?

In a very early version of the script, Catalonia declared its independence. After it happened we took that out of the script, necessarily. The story was really being nourished by reality all the time. We are projecting into the future and give a kind of a worst case scenario but it's eerie how believable it is. Alarming things are going on. We are lacking heroes right now. We need solid people in the seats of power at the right moment, otherwise we might be in danger. Does history have to repeat itself? This is a question that the king is pondering throughout. It's a question we ask ourselves.

### IN "THE BAREFOOT EMPEROR", A NEW EUROPE – NOVA EUROPA – TAKES SHAPE. WHAT IS IT LIKE?

Nova Europa is a Europe of nation states where people are focusing on their specific national identities and are reconnecting with their Christian roots. And, very importantly, undesirable individuals are going to



Jessica Woodworth and Peter Brosens on set © Hassan Abdelghani

be expelled from Europe via "visitors' centres" that we have situated in our fictional world in Malta, North Macedonia, Wallonia, Kosovo and Luxembourg. This earns the mastermind of Nova Europa the nickname "Mama Wakolux" (played by Geraldine Chaplin).

There has to be a counterpoint to narrow-mindedness. And the most powerful weapon we have, as filmmakers, is humour. Humour is contagious and builds bridges. It spotlights our common humanity. But, of course, underneath every effective comedy is a very serious drama.

YOU ARE WRITING, DIRECTING, PRODUCING TOGETHER WITH PETER BROSENS. THAT DOESN'T ONLY MEAN A MALE/FEMALE, BUT ALSO A EUROPEAN/AMERICAN TEAM. HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN THE CREATIVE EQUILIBRIUM ESPECIALLY IN MAKING A POLITICAL FILM. DO YOU HAVE DIFFERENT VIEWS, DIFFERENT ACCESSES TO YOUR WORK?

First of all, I never consider myself a female filmmaker. I'm just a filmmaker. And I am American-born but grew up in Europe and also have Belgian nationality. I am much more at home in Europe than in the USA. So in our creative duo what's more important is what



The Barefoot Emperor

we have in common. We share a similar sense of humour, a similar taste in music, art and literature and a genuine curiosity about our world. We do split our responsibilities, though. Peter is more deeply involved in production, for example. And I have always taken charge of the casting, rehearsal and directing of all the actors from beginning to end. But we come up with ideas together and then ping pong the script. On set we explore the *mise en scène* together. We have only produced our own films up till now. We haven't felt the necessity to make ads on the side, although I wouldn't mind. We've managed to make a film every three years

since "Khadak" in 2006 (winner of the Lion of the Future award in Venice). We take the responsibility and risk as main producers, which is very risky. But we are committed. We really believe in the force and function of cinema. We don't doubt our choices, even though we have neither financial security nor professional certainty. It's so difficult to mount a production. You need a huge amount of perseverance and conviction, plus a little bit of luck. And thinking every time that the

current film could be your last is the best way to make a film. It elevates everything to another level. It's a huge privilege to pull a team together around one mad idea. And switching to comedy after three very serious dramas was definitely a mad step. You're warned by everyone that comedy is the most difficult thing to do. And that's really no joke.

WHAT ARE YOUR UPCOMING PLANS?

At the moment, we are financing my next project; I wrote an adaptation of Dino Buzzati's "The Tartar Steppe" (Il deserto dei Tartari) at Torino Film Lab and I plan to shoot it in Armenia.