

## Interview with Myrsini Aristidou

By Karin Schiefer  
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**I have had the pleasure of seeing two of your most recent short films, "ARIA" and "SEMELE". They have several elements in common. One of them is a title that focuses on the first name of the protagonist, who is in both cases a very strong-willed, young female character. How did these characters arise in your imagination?**

**Myrsini Aristidou:** The creation of these strong personalities, who, by their way of being, provoke emotions such as frustration or disappointment as if they are constantly attracting them, is central in my work, and in my process of forming characters for my films. In my world and in theirs, the more you try, the more you fail, until you learn how to let go and trust the process. Being a very strong-willed person myself, the films certainly become a reflection of my own emotional world, even though the stories of Aria and Semele are not directly related to my own experiences.

**What your protagonists also share is a more or less absent father who tries to escape his responsibility. Both girls refuse to accept this behaviour, so inevitably they confront these men with the needs and the longings they feel as daughters.**

**M.A.:** My brother and I were raised by my mother, and would see our father occasionally, as he also lived in Cyprus, not far from us. When I was young, we didn't have a close relationship; however, as I grew older we came closer, and I have come to accept and love him exactly as he is. However, I do



*Still from "Aria"*

acknowledge that I grew up without a father figure in my life, and that definitely has defined my character and personality. Sometimes I still wonder how a healthy relationship between a daughter and a father is meant to be. Nevertheless, both my characters, Aria as well as Semele, are intent on this confrontation; they want very much to create a bond.

**At the very beginning of both films we see a scene of abandonment: little Semele is left on her own by a taxi driver next to her father's workplace, and in "ARIA" an Asian woman who apparently has no ID papers is left on her own in the port of Athens. You develop very personal stories, but they are clearly located in a societal context.**

**M.A.:** "ARIA" is a very multi-layered story. When I started writing "ARIA" it was supposed to become my first feature film. There is a relationship between Aria and the Chinese girl, in that even though they are from two different worlds, they are ultimately experiencing similar emotions of abandonment and rejection. On a second note, the element of immigration was very important for me in the film. I lived in the US for seven years and experienced the feeling of being alone, far from family and being an immigrant in a foreign country. On a third note, I wanted to underline the great influence of China currently in Greece, with the buying of the port, which is also the location where I shot "ARIA". In general the Chinese immigrants remain a very closed society in Greece; however, the specific Chinese girl in the film feels excluded because she is a misfit even within her own community. This experience of isolation makes the two girls share a common feeling, and therefore share a common experience during the film. I had a similar experience with my very good Chinese friend in New York, where we shared very similar sentiments and understandings about life, even though we came from such different backgrounds. Both the Chinese and Greek cultures are rooted so far back in history that

there is an inevitable depth in our understanding beyond words. The culmination of these layers together made the story of "ARIA" take shape.

**The camera in "ARIA" seems to be moving all the time. Why did you decide to express a state of unrest by your camera work?**

**M.A.:** I wanted to adapt the shooting style to the energy of the location where the film took place. Athens for me is this: a messy, fast, chaotic city, yet it feels so liberating and honest in its own specific way. Greek people, they drive their motorcycles, roll a cigarette, drink a coffee and talk on their cellphone – all at the same time. I wanted to transport the viewer into this fast-moving world.

**Thanks to "ARIA" you were selected for the Cinéfondation Residence programme, a four-month fellowship in Paris. What is it about?**

**M.A.:** There was a very tough selection process to go through, as filmmakers from all over the world apply, and only six projects per session are accepted for the fellowship. The Residence provides us with free accommodation in Paris and €800 spending money per month. The six filmmakers share a big apartment; and you're free to concentrate on your project at your own pace, while also being invited to visit many cultural sites and museums in and around Paris, and take French classes. We were given the opportunity to pitch our project at the Cannes Film Festival, and we may get our scripts translated into French later on. Basically you have time and space to focus on your script without the need to follow any structured programme. Even if we didn't consistently discuss our writing, we shared a lot together – discussing, watching movies, cooking etc. I had shot "ARIA" in February, and the Residence programme started in March; that's why I spent a lot of time editing. My stay in Paris led me to the conclusion that I would not make "ARIA" into my first feature film. I decided that I wanted to shoot my first film in Cyprus, where I am from, and a world that is closer to my heart.



*Still from "Aria"*

**You left Cyprus after school to study in New York. What made you leave home to study that far away, and what takes you back now to shoot your first film in Cyprus?**

**M.A.:** I think for a person who grew up on an island it is not that surprising to feel the urge to escape. I started travelling at a very young age thanks to my mother, who worked in the travel and tourism industry. Going far away never scared me, and it is very common for young people from Cyprus to study abroad, usually in Greece or in the UK. At the time, I had applied unknown to my parents to go to the US, and specifically Pratt Institute in New York, for my undergraduate studies. Since I was a kid it had been a dream for me to live in New York. I was very influenced by the film "Great Expectations" by Alfonso Cuarón. As far back as I can remember, I would paint, and then I followed up with photography, until I discovered film and completely fell in love with the medium. That is why I decided to continue with an MFA in Film at NYU Tisch.

Living in New York for many years however, made me feel as if I was disconnecting from myself. I think "ARIA" is a reflection of this feeling. Life in New York doesn't allow time for introspection, for depth; everything is fast-paced and has to be efficient. When I started to work on "ARIA" I was craving for that New York energy and had the impression that everything was so slow in Europe. After a while I realised that this pace goes hand in hand with a lack of serenity and calmness. Athens struck me as a compromise between the two energies I still wanted to be part of simultaneously. Maybe it was the financially carefree period of the residence in Paris that allowed me to focus on my work, and

I made up my mind to do the first feature in Cyprus. I realised how creativity can blossom through balance and peace, and by being in a place closer to your heart.

**What are your plans now?**

**M.A.:** We have been in the development stage of the film, and the plan is to shoot the movie very soon. We are planning on making a Cypriot-French-Greek co-production