

Interview with Neus Ballús: "We are selfish creatures"



Staff Only: Neus Ballús and Sergi López © Lina Badenes

By Sarah Hurtes
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Ms Ballús, you are the director of the upcoming film "Staff Only", a coming-of-age drama exploring international tourism in Senegal. What is the story about?

NEUS BALLUS: At both the Saly Hotel and Royal Saly hotel – the main settings of the film – there is a door that reads "Staff Only". This door physically separates the world of tourists and the local workers. Marta, the main character and driving force of the film, is the only tourist who will cross that threshold in her pursuit of getting to know the locals. Marta is a young, white, European girl. This will shape her relationship to Khouma (a filmmaker slightly older than herself) as well as to Aissatou (a girl who cleans the hotel rooms). Marta trusts in her ability to develop these relationships, whereas her father tries to limit his daughter's movements, considering her too naïve, immature and unwise. In the course of the film, Marta will experience a transformation that will lead her to re-evaluate her initial confidence and discover just how much she unknowingly has in common with some of her father's attitudes.

Had you ever been to Senegal before?

N.B.: The very first time I came to Senegal I was 23. I remember it as being shocking. I was in a village where there was no water and no electricity. I stayed there for three weeks to shoot a documentary with a friend. I saw how difficult it was for people to receive basic necessities or attain access to health care services. That was not the shocking part though. After some time in the village, I realised I was only half a kilometre away from a huge tourist complex. The reality over there was completely different. When I first visited the centre, there were swimming pools, indoor alleys with green grass, and gigantic buffets. I asked myself: how can anyone be a decent tourist – barricaded in such a golden cage, with no access to the outside world?

Indeed.

N.B.: But then I realised, even if people ventured outside these big hotel structures, it would *still* be difficult to relate to the Senegalese people and their culture. Over there I recall being tagged as "white European with money". Added to this, there were linguistic barriers. I did not speak French at the time. It was complicated to build friendships for instance. Living in Barcelona as a child, I used to think that if two people wanted to relate to each other and had the will to do so, they could. No matter where they come from, no matter their economic background. Now I realise the position you take in society – this complex structure – governs relations and friendships. This is what I am exploring in "Staff Only".

Do you believe it is possible for two people to have an honest and disinterested relationship?

N.B.: I believe that forming an honest relationship is extremely difficult. Relationships are always some form of exchange, guided by personal interests. Even in a loving relationship. Otherwise people would not be together. We are selfish creatures. Everyone is expected to give and receive. This is universal. This becomes even more apparent in touristic places, where relationships are predefined in a context of sharp inequalities. I think the coexistence of people of different origins and sociocultural backgrounds as well as economic ones is one of the greatest challenges of our time. However, what I discovered in my travelling experiences is that it is much easier to build friendships among women from all over the world. This is my conclusion after all these years of travelling. Within all these structures of economic and social differences, women of more or less of the same age can solve these barriers.

Why do you think that is?

N.B.: Maybe it is because women feel they are not at the centre of society but on the outskirts, marginalised by their gender. To this day, we still share common problems. Reflecting on this, I believe it is also linked to our common ability to empathise. I am not suggesting that men do not have the capacity to empathise, far from it. However, drawing from my own gut instinct and personal experiences, I feel the level of empathy amongst women is higher.

Has this been the case for you on the set of "Staff Only"?



N.B.: I am very touched and humbled by my working relationship with Elena Andrada, 19, who plays the protagonist of the film: the 17-year-old Marta. Elena had never acted before. The level of trust she puts in me is astonishing. She lets me transform her life into fiction with absolute faith on a day-to-day basis. It has been very intense emotionally. For some scenes, I need to make her cry and therefore have to tell her horrible stories. We finish work feeling exhausted. We need to laugh at the end of the day. I believe that is the beauty of directing an actor. As professionals you have to support each other, work as a team.

Staff Only: Sergi López, Ian Samsó and Elena Andrada © Edmon Roch

Where does the crew come from?

N.B.: People come from various regions of Spain. There is also a Senegalese team. We could make another film about the relationship between those working on set. It takes time to adapt to each other. But so far I have found the shooting filled with rich experiences.

Can you share an example of what you would call a rich experience from shooting "Staff Only"?

N.B.: Before the shooting officially began, I was with the actress playing the role of the Senegalese cleaning lady Aissatou. She too had zero acting experience and had never worked as a cleaning lady. That is why I sent her to train with the real cleaning ladies of the Saly hotel where we are currently shooting. I went to join them for a couple of days. It was very touching to see how these women showed so much passion in their work. I think it was the first time foreigners had shown interest in

them. They were so proud to show us the techniques they had learnt over the years. They demonstrated how to properly fold towels or how to make the bed elegantly. They also showed us how they picked flowers in the hotel's garden each morning to display on the bed for when new customers checked in. Originally I was just there to make sure everything was going well. I didn't expect to be so moved by this pre-shoot experience. It felt so intimate.

Films like "Paradise: Love" (Ulrich Seidl, 2012) "Heading South" (Laurent Cantet, 2005), or "Le silence de Lorna" (Dardenne, 2008) also explore how Europeans end up reproducing colonial forms of domination. All these films are directed by men. Why do you think that is?

N.B.: Given that only 10% of the films on the market are directed by women, sadly it is difficult to find many mainstream films produced and directed by women. We are lacking variety in who directs what. This is how the industry works. This impossibility of giving chances to women is still an inherent aspect of our industry. At the moment, there are many female directors who inspire me, but none that deal with this subject. I am part of an association addressing this subject in Catalonia, pushing for more female leads, female filmmakers, and more variety in the content of films. As we see from the data in Spain, things are not getting better. The level of female filmmakers is not increasing.

What motivated you to become a filmmaker?

N.B.: When I was younger, I appreciated a whole array of different subjects. I thought: if I learn how to make movies, I can dive deep into each of these subjects through my films. This is why I took an audiovisual bachelor's degree. At the beginning of my studies I was not particularly interested in theoretical lessons on the history of cinema. It was only during my third year that I was given the opportunity to make documentaries. I realised at that moment that I had a singular vision of the world. My documentaries seemed particularly different from those of the other students. After making several short films, I was confident enough to direct my first feature film "The Plague" in 2013, a hybrid between fiction and documentary.

I have read that you are strongly interested in cinema playing between documentary and fiction. Can you explain what you mean by that?

N.B.: For "The Plague", I was working with non-actors who were playing themselves, drawing from their own life experience. Of course it was still staged, a written fiction with dialogue. But the actors *played* themselves. I tend to work with people who have never acted before. As they don't have any experience, they have to be very similar to the character that they play. This is also the case for "Staff Only". Most of my actors are interacting on a film set for the first time. Regardless, I offered them the chance to take an acting course so that they would have a basic understanding of how to work with the camera. The casting is crucial, though it has to be said that I am also working with Sergi López – playing the role of the father – who is a very well-known actor. I am also working with some Senegalese actors for the secondary roles. More than that, I like to shoot in locations where life goes on. Currently in the Saly Hotels where we are, there are tourists staying. Sometimes they get into the shot but that doesn't stop us from filming. In a way, reality gets into the structure of the film.