

Interview with Nicole Palo



Nicole Palo © Sergio Santamaria

By Marian Evans
October 2018

Where did “Emma Peeters” come from?

Nicole Palo: “Emma Peeters”, the story of a disappointed actress who decides to kill herself in order to achieve something, was inspired by my own experience of rejection at a period of my life when it seemed that all my projects were doomed to failure. I managed to let go of my frustration by inventing a character (just loosely based on my own person – I gave her all my flaws) who decides “she would not take it anymore” and prepares her suicide. But it took such a long time to make Emma... I thought she would never get to kill herself! (Laugh...) So I kept going back into depression, doing my bread and butter jobs, writing funding applications for producers, mainly, and having more inspiration for Emma. But I learned a lot about myself. I think I can say I accept myself now and have learned to enjoy the process, instead of striving for achievement.



Crew on set of Emma Peeters © Sergio Santamaria

After your first feature, “Get Born”, it took you seven years to make “Emma Peeters”. Can you talk about the script development and the challenges in getting the film financed?

NP: It was a tough script to write. I had to find the right tone between comedy and emotion. I had to build the story out of the tension between love and death. I wanted it to be funny but at the same time I wanted the audience to relate to Emma’s frustration and loneliness. The other challenge was to develop the love story and keep Emma’s objective to commit suicide. This was made possible thanks to the character of Alex, the eccentric funeral home employee, who offers to help her bring her project to completion.

Financing took a long time, maybe because there is a taboo around suicide. It was difficult to make the readers understand the tone of the film and it was difficult for them to trust it was going to work. Now the film is made and they can see for themselves.

The approach to the subject is light. The film is more about existential questions, about how to live one's life. Suicide is to be understood in its symbolic and philosophical sense. We can decide to die or we can live and even enjoy life. It's all a question of choice and perception. Within comedy the film manages to touch some real emotions. The first audience we had in Venice was a real audience, Italian moviegoers not cinema professionals, and they reacted really well. I don't think they were shocked by the film. Perhaps it helps audiences take life and death a little less seriously.



Emma Peeters © Sergio Santamaria

How did you select and work with the actors?

NP: I had to find actors who were as good in comedy as in drama. Both Monia Chokri and Fabrice Adde are wonderful actors and bring their uniqueness to their part. They make a very original couple for a romantic comedy, which refreshes the genre.

I spent a lot of time in preparation with both actors, reading the script, discussing their characters and then adapting the scenes and dialogue. But on set, we rehearsed very little. The characters had become their own and they could just live out the scenes. I always trust my actors. They are the ones going through the emotions and they can feel what sounds right or wrong. But I do not let them improvise on set. It is a comedy, so the text has to be sharp and concise to keep the rhythm.

“Get Born” was micro-budget. What did it mean to have a bigger budget this time? And what did you bring to “Emma Peeters” from the “Get Born” experience?

NP: “Get Born” was made with € 140 000. We had ten times the budget for “Emma Peeters” but still it was a small budget, especially since the film was much more ambitious.

The main difference was that I had a much more experienced team for “Emma Peeters”. We shot “Emma Peeters” in 28 days, in difficult conditions. In the end, I didn't have more time in preparation or rehearsals with the actors, or on the set to actually shoot the scenes. The exteriors in Paris especially brought a lot of stress.

What I learned from “Get Born” was to work fast. On “Get Born”, most of the members of the team were making their first film and I had hardly any experience at all. There was something exhilarating about that and the urgency with which “Get Born” was made – one year from writing to screening – allowed me to keep the initial creative impulse.

With “Emma Peeters” I discovered how useful it can be to work seven years on a script and know it inside out. Even though the shooting was very stressful, I never lost track of the meaning of a scene and the intention behind it.

“Emma Peeters” is a co-production with Canada. How did the co-production come about?

NP: Co-producing with Canada saved the film. We had been trying to co-produce with France for years and we were hitting a brick wall. For some reason, the humour of my film did not get through in France, on paper at least.

We went to a co-production forum in Montreal and the reaction to the pitch was just amazing. The professionals present understood the tone and were excited by the project. My producers, Gregory Zalcman and Alon Knoll (Take Five, Belgium) met Serge Noël (Possibles Média, Canada) and they put together the co-production. They completed the Belgian financing and obtained all the available funding in Canada, and also Eurimages. Being a Belgian-American, I find myself at home in Quebec because they share European culture and American mentality.



Emma Peeters

“Emma Peeters” opened at the prestigious Giornate Degli Autori in Venice and will soon show at other festivals, with releases planned for North America and Belgium. Do you know what appealed to the selectors?

NP: The selectors of the Giornate Degli Autori were very enthusiastic about “Emma Peeters”. I was surprised, since I had been told that my film was not festival material because it was a comedy. There is a perception that festival films have to be serious, even boring. Well, this is



not true. The selector, Sylvain Auzou, had a real crush on the film and said it made him feel good and Giorgio Gosetti, the festival director, was very happy to present an “intelligent comedy”. He said at the press conference: “And you are really going to laugh!” Funny when you think it is about a girl who wants to end it all...

Emma Peeters

Who do you see as your primary audiences?

NP: My producers and distributors see the primary audience as female 30+. But I think the audience is broader than that. Many mature men like the film, the festival selectors for example. And my composer, Robert Marcel Lepage, was drawn to the project right away. He comes from jazz and liked the idea of bringing a vintage touch to the music in reference to cinema history. All the references I gave to my creative team were old: nouvelle vague, Bergman, musical comedies, “Taxi Driver”, Jim Morrison... I guess I’m old school! But this makes the film appealing to cinemagoers, male or female, young or old. I know my film won’t appeal to teenagers and people who like action blockbusters... but that’s OK. It is actually a

very good thing commercially to reach the babyboomers since they still go to the movies.

How has the new emphasis on gender parity in the film industry affected you?

NP: "The times they are a changin' " as Bob Dylan would say. There is rising awareness about women making films. The difficulties we meet as women are hard to explain because there is no direct discrimination. We have access to schools, funds, production. The way we get put aside is very subtle. It goes from not having our name mentioned alongside the title of our film; not being invited to events in relation to our film; not being considered as potential jury members for festivals (there are hardly ever women directors – the female representatives are nearly always actors); not having as much press coverage as men; having patronising reviews (recently I read about a woman director: "she does not have the means to fulfil her ambitions") and mostly having access to smaller budgets than men. Strangely, I think women did not have such a hard time in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. I have many examples of women directors of the older generation: Jane Campion, whom I admire very much, Chantal Akerman, Coline Serreau, Claire Denis, Claire Simon, Anne Fontaine, Noémie Lvovsky... It seems the world has been going backwards on many questions.

I have engaged with the group "Elles Font Des Films" to try to understand and find solutions to a very complex problem. One aspect is for women to build more confidence and unite. Having a place to talk without being undermined is a good start. Women have to start



building networks. Men have been joining "clubs" for generations. Not women. But I'm not a hard-core feminist, not at all. I believe men should be part of the movement too. We have all something to gain from more equality. My hope is that soon we won't have to specify the gender of a filmmaker and can just look at the artist as an individual.

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