

Interview with Sonia Liza Kenterman



By Nick Holdsworth
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"Tailor"

Sonia Liza Kenterman's life bridges European boundaries. Born to a Greek mother and German father, she grew up in Greece and studied filmmaking in both Athens and London.

Her first film, "Nicoleta", a fiction short produced as her graduation film at the London Film School, demonstrated a mature and talented grasp of the essentials of good filmmaking: strong characters in a compelling narrative told through powerful and beautiful images. A second short, "White Sheet", was produced by Athens-based producer Fenia Cossovitsa, who is also lead producer on Sonia's debut feature, "Tailor", a co-production with Belgium and Germany, which has also already secured a top international sales agent, Berlin-based Pluto Film.

"Tailor", which has a budget of €970,000 including Eurimages support of €165,000, won development funding from French film fund CNC in 2014 after the project was presented at the Thessaloniki film festival.

Although the film is set in contemporary Athens and focuses on the difficulties faced by a middle-aged tailor, Sonia says she "never intended to write a script" about the severe economic crisis that continues to grip Greece.

The film "was always about a man who is on the verge of losing everything... But he still comes up with a solution, which is completely irrational...it is almost a period solution. He finds a way to reinvent himself and his craft by returning to the past. We wanted him to be a tailor - it may sound clichéd, but he is going to find a way to keep dressing the world. And we came up with the idea of wedding dressings. We like this symbolism that on the brink of his total collapse he finds a solution through the rebirth of others..."

Eurimages talks with Sonia Liza Kenterman about filmmaking as a woman director.

How did you get into filmmaking? What was the key to becoming a director?

Sonia Liza Kenterman: This is what I wanted to do since I was 13. I was a writer. I grew up in an environment where I was not allowed to watch TV. When they could no longer tell me not to watch, my mother started bringing masses of VHS tapes along; they were all films and I understood that my scribbles were like scenes. When I watched Angelopoulos' "Landscape in the Mist" and Kieslowskis "Three Colours: Blue"... these films spoke to me. They are very strong visually. That was when I decided this is what I want to do.

I studied sociology in Athens and then went to the Greek film school there and had one unsuccessful year in drama school. I made a short film in Greece that got me into the London Film School; the best years of my life so far were at the LFS.

Do you feel that you faced greater obstacles than male colleagues in becoming a director?

S.K.: Yes, of course! I grew up in an almost patriarchal society, but had a full-time career woman as a mother. She is a very strong woman. My first understanding of the world came through my mother, who did what she wanted to in life and still does.

There are many stereotypes in life in Greece as to what women can do and cannot do. Directing is a largely male field. Going to LFS I had the completely opposite experience, because there is no way that anybody amongst the teachers or students would treat us differently because we are women. Greece and England are two completely different worlds. No one would dare make a sexist joke in England.

What messages did you get from those around you in the film world in your early days about the prospects for women in the film industry?

S.K.: One of the things in Greece that people expect from women is that they are good students. This is actually true, even in film school. The girls were generally better students, but in a theoretical way. There have been moments when I have heard the most unbelievable things from male classmates - they would turn to us and say: "Well you are girls you should do production design on this film!"

In 2013, when "Nicoleta" was competing in the film festivals in Greece (Best Drama Award at the Greek short film festival), for the first time ever all the awards went to women directors. Every single newspaper covered us. Most of us are now making our first features - and accessing funding schemes in Greece. It changed in one year. I think this was the first year this happened. Nowadays, in Greece some of the best producers are also women. And Fenia [Cossovitsa] is one of them.

Describe the main challenges and opportunities you encountered when you made your first film.

S.K.: Everything was much more challenging than I had ever known in my life.

Did being a woman prove to be an asset or an obstacle to raising money, attracting producers and other partners?

S.K.: I think in Europe now it is a time when people are interested in women filmmakers; we are no longer considered a minority.

How would you describe your directing style? Do you think this differs from the directorial styles and approaches of men?

S.K.: It is a very difficult question to answer. I see the world from my perspective. I see stories from my perspective and don't see how they are different from a man's point of view. When you see a film by Andrea Arnold, or Jane Campion, you can feel it's a woman director, not only from the way they are depicting and exploring the female characters, but also mostly from the male characters. But it is very difficult to answer this question for myself. When constructing the story and writing the script, together with Tracy Sunderland, our main concern was to fully understand our male hero, to see the story from his perspective, and not judge him nor project our prejudices on him. Perhaps one understands more about the opposite sex from a work of art created by the opposite sex.

"Tailor" is an utterly character-driven story. The aesthetic choices and shooting style derive from the character's peculiar microcosm and the way he doesn't fit in the world.

What different values and approaches do women directors bring to cinema?

S.K.: I feel sometimes that as films either depict the world now or our thoughts of it in the past or future, women's films depict the world from a completely different perspective. We have long seen the world through the eyes of men and now it is time to see it through women's eyes; that is why it is so important to see more films from women. History so far is mostly written by men...I don't consider myself a feminist, but to realise that, after so many years of women's achievements, a woman's position in the world is still at stake is horrifying. It is ironic that the western world criticises the position of women in Muslim countries, when, considering the social rights we have in the western world, the position of women in relation to men is still off the scale.

As a woman director are you inclined to use more women in your cast/crew?

S.K.: My producers, production designer and manager are women. My co-writer, Tracy Sunderland, is a woman. But the protagonist in my film is a man! It wasn't a conscious choice. They are people I work very well with. I work with women in the same way. I think it is about being open to each other and democratic; and being able to share the same vision.

Why do you think until now cinema has remained a creative area dominated by men?

S.K.: Everything in our society is dominated by men; every field. There is a strange thing with cinema - it is the only art based on technology; it could not happen without technology and it happened because of technology. And technology has mostly been in men's hands.

Should there be more initiatives to channel money and opportunities to women filmmakers?

S.K.: Yes, there should be more funding channelled towards women. And it should not happen by chance but in a more organised way. The great benefit of working in Europe is that films are funded by ministries of culture and by public TV broadcasters whose criteria are mainly focused on a story world and having a good script. I think we are very lucky to make films in such a way, though it takes a lot of time and patience. If more initiatives support women filmmakers, cinema will benefit, as more films will arise from a different perspective.

Since the Weinstein revelations there have been allegations of widespread sexual harassment in the film industry (and other creative fields). Have you ever encountered such harassment yourself?

S.K.: I tend to be very cautious and avoid difficult situations; my instinct manages to protect me. It was such a shock to hear about the sense of guilt the victims have gone through for so many years.