

Interview with Teona Strugar Mitevska



By Nick Holdsworth
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"God Exists, her name is Petrunija"

Teona Strugar Mitevska is an award-winning Macedonian director, whose latest film "God exists, her name is Petrunija" started shooting on location in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" on 19 January 2018. Backed by Eurimages with €224,000 in production support, the film tells the story of a woman who challenges the local male-dominated Orthodox Church and provincial society when she wins a test of strength and skills traditionally won by a man. Inspired by a true story - that of a 31-year-old single, unemployed woman, who dives into an icy river on Epiphany (19 January) to retrieve a crucifix that is believed to bestow blessings and luck for the coming year - the film, her fifth feature, is co-written with Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)-based Elma Tatagaric (with whom she collaborated on her last film 'When the day had no name'), produced by Teona's sister Labina Mitevska. The Director of Photography is Belgian cinematographer Virginie Saint Martin, who in 2007 lensed Teona's acclaimed second film "I Am From Titov Veles".

Like many of 43-year-old Teona's films, "God exists, her name is Petrunija" is a film with a strong female message, reflecting the director's belief in the power of film to allow women directors to tell their own stories.

Eurimages talks to Teona about her career and the challenges she has faced as a woman director.

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



Teona Strugar Mitevska: I decided to become a director when I found the courage to dare to be - when I gave myself licence to believe that I also have the right to have this ambition. That was almost 20 years ago.

Shooting of film "God Exists, her name is Petrunija"

I got into filmmaking step by step. I come from an artistic family, my father is a painter and I was a child actor - my first film on TV was when I was 6 years old, it was in the former Yugoslavia. I was part of a pool of children available for mostly radio drama. After school every Wednesday I would go to National Radio and TV, where I would be given a text for a radio drama. I loved it. I then took up painting, photography, attended university for the visual arts (Philadelphia), returned to Macedonia and worked in advertising and then finally gained the courage to make films.

Later I applied to graduate school at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts on a three-year scholarship. In my second year my first film, a short called "Veta", got into the Berlin film festival (Panorama) and after that opportunities came my way.

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

T.S.M.: It would be wrong and dishonest to claim otherwise. For me it is evident that we do. All the time I have seen this.

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?

T.S.M.: There were 30 of us on my course at NYU - half women, half men. There, we were given licence to do what we wanted. That was not a problem. It is later on when you face the problems of the industry that reality strikes you. At Tisch they had positive discrimination. Maybe I got a chance to enter the school as part of this attitude.



Shooting of film "God Exists, her name is Petrunija"

I made my first feature, "How I Killed a Saint", with [my sister] Labina. We can't blame everything on attitudes. Macedonia at that moment [released 2004] was newly independent; in the Yugoslav film production system there were hardly any women other than editors or script supervisors, but never directors. When I came as a young woman with \$200,000 (or Macedonian denars - I don't remember the currency), enough to make my first feature, I faced a crew of men. I was 27 or 28 at the time and facing a crew of men aged over 50 from the ancient Yugoslav system. They were foreign to me and I was foreign to them. It was like a meeting of hunters and animal.

It was a daily struggle. You can change things on paper, but the attitudes in society take years and years. I was the first one, so the hits were harder on me. But that is what you do in order to change things.

I shall give you a couple of examples: I am shooting a scene, it is the end of the day and in the middle of a shot the light goes off, because the grip has decided that his day is finished...or I am directing a scene and there is a driver who says "come on Teona, I have 'done' 50 films in my life and this is not the way you shoot a film - you have to do 'he speaks, she speaks...'" You listen and are polite and say, "Thank you, but let me continue."

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

T.S.M.: This is how a woman functions; you apply to a film fund and we figure with my sister if we apply for less money we are more likely to get it.

The first film ["How I Killed a Saint"] got into the Tiger competition at Rotterdam. It was very successful. After a time the [Macedonian] Ministry of Culture asked us: "I don't understand why you and your sister always ask for such a small budget for your film. Why not ask for the same amount as the rest?" I said if we had asked for the same we would not have got it. We knew how things worked; so this was our way to get the money and make the film.

This forces you to be really creative as a director. You find a way. When you are forced to find a way it pushes you.

Were things easier for your second and subsequent films? Did being a woman prove to be an asset or an obstacle?

T.S.M.: I would not say that being woman has ever been an asset; maybe an obstacle, but I never tried to pay attention to this. It can be overwhelming. It has been a rule in the industry that as a woman you are less bankable; unfortunately those are the attitudes that still prevail.

Things did get easier. For each film I have made I have always got money first outside my country and then in Macedonia. For example, for "I Am From Tito Veles" first I applied to the Slovenian film fund, then for French money and then Macedonian money. Every time we applied to the [Macedonian] film fund we were refused but we applied for a second or third time; that tells you about the attitude.

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

T.S.M.: It is a question I am thinking a lot about. When I look at contemporary art I do not make a distinction between the genders of the artists; I look at the content, the meaning.

It is natural that women's stories differ from men's because our experience on earth, our fight has been very different. One could claim that a director's style is very personal, but also being a woman is very personal. It is inevitable that the directing style is connected to the gender also. When you tell a story it is closely connected to this.

With every project it is a challenge to push the cinematic form further. A certain story requires colours; for example, "When the day had no name" is a film without colour because the story required that approach. I believe there is only one way for each story to be told and as a filmmaker you must find the right way to tell the story. But all my films are very visual because I believe cinema is very visual.

Do you think that more women directors will have a positive impact on European cinema?

T.S.M.: Of course - every opportunity given to somebody else, every door opened brings enlightenment to everybody. I think we live in an exciting era in every sense - in terms of awareness, we become more aware about inequalities at all levels.

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

T.S.M.: Definitely, and I insist on it boldly and without hesitation; it is the minimum I can do. Labina and I try to do things that we like. We are both mothers and usually women who work in cinema are mothers too, so, we try to take this into account and be flexible. We make our



films with our children. It works - you just have to be more flexible and be forthcoming about these issues and then it works.

For this new film most of the crew are women; even our grip and gaffer are women. My first assistant is a man - I have worked with him for years. We have a mixed crew, but many head positions are women.

Still from film "God Exists, her name is Petrunija"

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

T.S.M.: Because the world belongs to men; how many women scientists have been erased from history? How many are we only rediscovering now?

But it is not necessarily about men or women, but the attitudes you support... there are many feminist men. I would not have had the opportunity to make the films I do if there were not feminist men around me, like from the Berlin film festival, that have supported me every time.

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

T.S.M.: "God exists, her name is Petrunija" is the first film of mine that passed through the Macedonian film fund with flying colours. Some years ago the fund set up a system where the first step of the evaluation is based on the script only, without a name.... the script passed very well, I was so happy. It is the first time since I started making films in Macedonia that I was given an equal chance, because we were evaluated solely on the script. This is not positive discrimination; this is just equality.

But that said, I do believe we need some kind of positive discrimination. I want younger women filmmakers in Macedonia to have the opportunity to make their films; to have their stories told. I know there is a possibility of a negative backlash, this is inevitable; but in the long run it is positive. It will bear fruit. The good things rise to the top.