

INTERVIEW WITH EGLE VERTELYTE



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DIRECTOR OF "MIRACLE"
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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BY TARA KARAJICA

Egle Vertelyte is a Lithuanian screenwriter and director. After studying History at the Vilnius University, she attended the European Film College in Denmark, where she made her first short films. In 2009, Egle moved to Mongolia, where she filmed her documentary "UB LAMA". She got her M.A. in Screenwriting from the National Film and Television School in the U.K in 2012. At present Egle lives and works in Vilnius. Together with producer Lukas Trimonis they have founded a company iN SCRiPT. They are developing and producing narrative driven projects for TV, fiction and documentary films. Egle also worked as a writer for several TV shows, collaborates as a screenwriter and script consultant with other directors and teaches art of screenwriting in Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater. "Miracle" is her debut feature that premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival.

Tara Karajica talks to Egle Vertelyte about her first film, her filmmaking and women in film today.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO FILMMAKING?

I have been very inspired by storytelling since I was a child. I acted in a kids' theatre in my home town of Šiauliai for ten years. I remember I saw "Underground" by Emir Kusturica when I was thirteen. I remember that it really had a huge impact on me: I was amazed by how he talks about reality, using a completely differ-

ent magical language. Around that time, I decided that I would like to study filmmaking and my dream was to enrol at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. However, my life never goes as planned. When I finished school, there was no course at the academy and I

went on to study history, which was another of my interests. I came back to cinema only four years later, after having graduated in history and having also studied art criticism. I never got the chance to study at the Lithuanian Academy – I did my film studies in Denmark and my MA in Screenwriting in England. But I am happy to come back to the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre now as a screenwriting teacher.

WHAT INSPIRED "MIRACLE"? WHY A PIG FARM?

I heard and remembered a lot of stories from the beginning of the 1990s that I found inspiring. One of them was a story about a woman who used to be an atheist during Soviet times, but when the Communist era ended, she was the one who sat in the front row at Church. I was always interested in whether these people just started to believe or if it was for purely pragmatic reasons. The pig farm also came naturally from the very beginning, when I started writing in 2008. Traditionally, pork has always been an important ingredient in Lithuanian cuisine. Similarly, in Soviet times, pig farms played a pivotal part in the structure



“Miracle” © Emil Christov

of collective farms. Even now, if you come to Lithuania and visit the countryside, you’ll still be able to see a lot of abandoned pig farms. Therefore, I have chosen the pig farm as a strong symbol of a Lithuanian village, but it was important to me that this symbol was deeply rooted in reality. Through the story of one pig farm, I wanted to show what happened to the village and the system, and how an abrupt social and economic change unfolded at the same time as the dramatic, but at the same time, comic life story of a strong woman and the people around her. The old system is a pig — Irena raised it and then she had to bury it with her own hands.

YOU ARE A SCREENWRITER. WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO DIRECT THIS PARTICULAR FILM, WHICH IS YOUR DEBUT? DID YOU LIKE THE EXPERIENCE?

I work as a screenwriter and earn my living from it. However, I am not new to directing. I directed several shorts as a student and a documentary film, “Ub Lama”, and this showed me that directing was also something I would really like to pursue. I would like to direct more and more in the future because it gives me the possibility to be in charge of the film from the very beginning to the very end. It is a bigger responsibility but also a possibility to explore your own story and to tell it the way you want. Also, writing is a very lonely process and being on set is like a reward for all those days of suffering.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE TRANSITION FROM DOCUMENTARIES TO FICTION?

Well, I would not call it a transition, because I have directed one feature-length documentary film and one fiction one. Whether it is documentary or fiction, I am interested in finding interesting stories and telling them to people. When I started filming my documentary, I was very fresh to directing. So I explored everything on the spot by myself. I felt the same when I directed my fiction film. I like this feeling of following the story where it leads me and trying something new.

THE ONCE POWERFUL IRENA IS NOT RESPECTED BY HER PEERS ANYMORE. IS THIS DUE TO GENDER CONFLICT OR POWER PLAY?

It is due to power play. Irena loses her power because the power is in the hands of those who know how to earn money and readapt. Gender conflict was not very big during Soviet times and you could find a lot of women who worked in leading positions. However, the difference is that, at home, the situation was usually not as equal as in the work place – women were not only working hard, but they were also doing the majority of things in the household.

“MIRACLE” IS AN ICONOCLASTIC FABLE, A SOCIAL COMEDY, A SENTIMENTAL DRAMA AND A REALIST ABSURDITY, WHERE SOMETIMES ALL IT TAKES IS A SIMPLE RAY OF LIGHT BETWEEN TWO CLOUDS TO DISPEL DESPAIR. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT AND THE FILM’S GENRE AND THEMES IT DEALS WITH?

Personally, I am inspired by the idea of mixing genres. I know that “Miracle” contains elements of many

different styles, but I justified this eclectic mixture to myself because of the topic and period of the film.



“Miracle” © Emil Christov



"Miracle" © Emil Christov

The film deals with the time of transition in the 1990s and this time was a mixture of everything. That's why it felt right to me to have an inconsistent style in the film.

IN THAT SENSE, WOULD IT BE FAIR TO SAY THE FILM IS A NOD TO THE FILMS OF ROY ANDERSSON, EMIR KUSTURICA AND AKI KAURISMÄKI?

These are filmmakers I really like and I used some of their films as references when I was working on "Miracle", but I tried to find my own thematic and stylistic touch that fitted the story I was trying to tell.

THE FILM CONFRONTS IN A HUMOUROUS WAY THE SLAVIC AND AMERICAN CULTURES. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

Yes, I think the main thematic conflict is based on this confrontation. It was interesting to me how, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people suddenly began to deny old Soviet values and, in a way, began to deny themselves, allured by "sexy" Western promises – which the American figure, Bernardas, represents – without critical evaluation.

YOU ALSO DELVE INTO THE NOSTALGIA OF COMMUNISM BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, RELIGIOUS REFERENCES ARE OMNIPRESENT. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT CONFLICT?

I am a strong believer in democracy, and I don't even want to imagine how difficult it would be to live now if things had stayed the same. However, the miracle of rampant capitalism that came with democracy was

quite cruel to some people, and the pain inflicted on people cannot be forgotten. There was so much pain in the birth of a new, democratic society and there is no point in sugar-coating the process. Moreover, the Church and religion did play an important role in this transition period: not only was it spiritually important to many people, but also as a place where power has shifted.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE AT THAT TIME? CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE PROCESS OF MAKING "MIRACLE"?

In general, the process was very long – much too long. I started writing the film in 2008 and the film was made in 2017. It took time for me to write the screenplay but the biggest challenge was to make it happen. Since it was my first feature and it was a historical film, it was hard to convince people that I could make it and to get it financed. Of course, later on there were other challenges, like technical issues to solve and working with a big crew without having the experience. But nothing was harder than the challenge of time and keeping the idea relevant to myself for so many years.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE FILM'S AESTHETIC?

One of the things I wanted from the visual aspect ratio (4:3) was to give the film an old-fashioned look so that, visually, it could evoke some Soviet films. I thought it would naturally relate to the time and the location and would help immerse the viewer in the world of the film more easily. At the same time, I thought the choice of this aspect ratio would help me stress the religious motive in the film by emphasising the earth and sky's



"Miracle" © Emil Christov

horizontal line. However, creating retro aesthetics or historical realism was never the biggest issue that we focused on. During our collaboration with director of photography Emil Christov and production designer Ramūnas Rastauskas, we worked on and talked more about having slightly exaggerated appearances, a theatrical composition and going for a well thought-out yet simple, almost primitive, look with bright details. This strategy helped us create a hyperrealistic feel.

“MIRACLE” IS A LITHUANIAN, BULGARIAN AND POLISH CO-PRODUCTION. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THIS ASPECT OF THE FILM’S PRODUCTION?

Yes, this film had a complex co-production structure. We had Emil Christov, the director of photography, and all the camera crew from Bulgaria and we shot some interior scenes there. All the post-production editing and sound work was done in Poland. During post-production, I travelled to Warsaw a lot. Despite the fact that the process was complex, I think it was worth the effort because it was very valuable to get out of the Lithuanian bubble and work with film professionals from other countries. It helped to tell the story more universally. Of course, I think it worked well because the countries we co-produced the film with were those who had similar historical circumstances; therefore, everyone on set understood the story and worked to tell it the best way.

HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERISE YOUR FILMMAKING STYLE?

I am still looking for myself and I wouldn’t feel comfortable characterising myself. I think that once you decide who you are, you stop changing and evolving. However, I can say that at the moment I like character-driven stories with a bit of humour and weirdness.

ARE YOU A FEMINIST? IF SO, HOW DOES IT INFORM YOUR FILMMAKING?

Yes, I am. I like strong leading female characters in my stories. However, I don’t like it when films are constructed only to transmit political messages. A humanistic and existential point of view is the most interesting to me. Humanity is full of paradoxes. For example, a character can seem to be an extreme feminist, but she discovers that what makes her truly happy is breastfeeding her child and cooking dinner for her husband.

These kinds of inner human conflicts are interesting to me.

WHAT SUBJECTS ARE YOU DRAWN TO BOTH AS A SCREENWRITER AND A DIRECTOR?

Well, it is difficult to say. Over the last few years, I’ve been working on four different fiction screenplays, all with different tones. I like it when stories are explored through different genres and when they have humour. I also like it when films give an experience of a reality that we are not aware of and the possibility to create the world. Topics that interest me are related to disillusion – I like to explore circumstances that make people take their masks off and confront themselves. It is always fascinating to me how we humans deal with reality, the contrast between how we want to see it and how it really is.

WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF WOMEN IN FILM? WHAT IS IT LIKE IN LITHUANIA?

In general, we have more and more emerging female directors. However, very few of them get to make fiction feature films. The biggest percentage of women directors still work in documentaries and short films, where the budget is not as high and the risk is smaller. Also, we lack women cinematographers, composers and editors. I am really happy about the fact that the fiction and documentary films that Lithuanian women make are seen both locally and internationally. We have strong female voices!

“The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund.”