

## INTERVIEW WITH ELINA PSYKOU



**DIRECTOR OF “SON OF SOFIA”  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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**TWO OLYMPIC GAMES ARE THE TEMPORAL REFERENCE POINTS OF “SON OF SOFIA”: THE ONE IN ATHENS WHERE THE STORY TAKES PLACE AND THE 1980 GAMES IN MOSCOW. YOU SEEM TO REFER TO THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES, WITH THE CASE OF ATHENS BEING THE CRADLE OF THE GAMES AND THE CASE OF MOSCOW RATHER AS A MEANS OF DEMONSTRATING THE POWER OF THE REGIME. WHY DID YOU SET YOUR STORY IN THE EARLY 2000s?**

The Olympic Games in Moscow took place in 1980, a couple of years before the collapse of the Soviet Union; the Athens Olympics was in 2004, a few years before the collapse of the Greek economy. I take this as an interesting metaphor and parallel. I used the Olympic Games as a metaphor for the life of Misha, the young boy who is one of my protagonists. His story is about the end of his innocence. I used the games as a metaphor for the end of the innocence of a country. I wanted to observe the two lines – the one of the boy and the other one of the country – as they end up meeting on the same path.

**IN THE FIRST TAKE SHOWING 10-YEAR-OLD MISHA WE SEE HIM FROM BEHIND WEARING A BACKPACK WITH A LITTLE TEDDY BEAR HANGING FROM IT. IT’S MISHA, THE MASCOT OF THE MOSCOW OLYMPIC**

**GAMES. THIS IS THE FIRST HINT OF SOMETHING THAT COMES OUT AS A VERY CENTRAL ELEMENT IN YOUR STORYTELLING: ANIMALS. THEY APPEAR AS MASKS, COSTUMES, FANTASIES OR TOYS (AS A WONDERFUL OBJECT OF PROJECTIONS). CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE YOU GAVE TO ANIMALS AND WHY YOU CHOSE ELEMENTS OF THE FAIRY TALE AS A GENRE?**

Fairy tales are full of animals and very often they are used to represent the good and the bad – the bad wolf, the good bear. For children, animals offer a first access to the symbols of life and to a lot of stereotypes and, as they discover this, also to the world of adults. I decided to use the animals since a child’s imagination is full of them and adults use them to introduce children to adult life. Of course, it was very useful that the organisers of the Olympic Games choose animals as their mascots. My film revolves around the stereotypes of the good and the bad. At the end of the film it should be clear that there’s neither good nor bad but only different points of view. I hope I managed to convey to the viewers that Mr Nikos, Sofia’s elderly husband, is not just a bad and selfish person: he does love Misha in the way he is able to express love. On the surface the boy seems to be the “good one” in my story, but it turns out

that he might also be a bad boy. I want the viewers to be aware that the categories of good and bad dissolve and that stereotypes are no more than stereotypes.



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**THE PREVAILING QUESTION OF "SON OF SOFIA" SEEMS TO FOCUS ON FAMILY. WHAT IS A FAMILY? WHAT ABOUT ITS FUNCTION, ITS MEANING? WHAT ABOUT THE SECRETS AND LIES IN A FAMILY AND THE EFFECT OF THESE SECRETS AND LIES?**

Absolutely. I wanted to talk about the secrets and lies behind a family, about the secrets and lies behind a country (again a metaphor), but also about the secrets and lies inside us. A family is not an entity: it consists of members, and each of them has his or her own secrets and lies. In a way I used the family as a small community to extend the reflection onto the bigger thing, the country.

**BY USING ALL THOSE ANIMALS AND METAPHORS YOU'RE EMBEDDING "SON OF SOFIA" IN A FANTASTICAL LAYER, BUT YOU BUILD YOUR STORY IN A VERY HARSH AND REALISTIC CONTEXT. SOPHIA, A YOUNG RUSSIAN WIDOW, LEAVES HER COUNTRY FOR GREECE AND – IN ORDER TO SECURE HER SON'S FUTURE – MARRIES AN OLD MAN, MR NIKOS, WHO STANDS FOR A WORLD AND VALUES THAT HAVE PASSED.**

It was one of my goals: to combine a realistic story with metaphorical levels. If you don't have a very powerful realistic story as a foundation, the metaphor won't work. I worked the script on both levels – the realistic and the metaphorical.

**THE SOPHISTICATED FEATURE OF YOUR STORYTELLING IS THAT YOU DON'T TREAT THESE TWO WORLDS SEPARATELY; INSTEAD, YOU BLUR THEM. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS BEHIND THE MINGLING OF THESE TWO NARRATIVE LEVELS?**

That was the most difficult part in the making of my film. I already tried to use this technique of mingling two worlds in my first movie "The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas".

In "Son of Sofia" I wanted to take a step forward. That was my aim. Telling the story only on a realistic level wouldn't have been enough of a challenge. And I think there are excellent movies about migration, economic collapse and crisis. I didn't just want to add one more movie about one of these topics. On the other hand, I didn't want to tell a story on an exclusively metaphorical level. I worked very hard on this combination, which was the biggest challenge not only for me, but also for the people who worked with me.

**CONSIDERING THE APARTMENT OF MR NIKOS, THE PUPPET FACTORY, THE STORAGE ROOM, THE MASKS AND ANIMAL COSTUMES, THE PROP AND SET DESIGNERS MUST HAVE HAD A HUGE TASK TO PERFORM. HOW DID THESE COLLABORATIONS EVOLVE? DID YOU GIVE VERY PRECISE INSTRUCTIONS OR DID YOU ALL MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER IN A PROCESS OF DIALOGUE?**

Mr Nikos's apartment was completely empty when we found it. The art director filled it like a museum. The real puppet factory was a very small factory specialising only in teddy bears. We added all the other animals. The art director and the costume designer had a huge amount of work, since we didn't have the budget to create props or costumes. They did a lot of research in stores selling old stuff, and in terms of clothes we found what we needed in a costume stock. We had already collaborated for my first feature film and developed our ideas as a kind of work in progress. There was profound mutual trust. We had a lot of conversations, exchanged references and photos, watched movies and paintings. This doesn't mean that



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I didn't have my lists with very precise elements that I absolutely wanted to be in my film, such as the guns or the stuffed animals. One of the essential questions that I had to resolve with the director of photography was how to differentiate the lighting between reality scenes and the fantasy scenes. We tried to create different worlds. Preparing a film is the fun part for me, whereas during the shooting I'm nervous and anxious to stick to the schedule and to make sure to give my very best. The preparation is the more playful period that gives me the time to research and to think.



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**LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR ACTORS. HOW ABOUT MISHA, WHO TURNS 11 DURING THE FILM AND WHO HAS VERY FEW LINES. HOW DID YOU CREATE HIS CHARACTER AND EVENTUALLY FIND YOUR ACTOR?**

Victor Khomut had never acted before; he attends school, of course, and he is an immigrant from Ukraine who is now living in Athens. There are several similarities with his film character. I found him in the course of a street casting session that I did in the multicultural schools of Athens where the students come from very different cultural backgrounds. While I was searching for a Russian-speaking boy, I visited those schools and discovered him in a schoolyard. It was love at first sight. I liked his face, particularly his eyes. I contacted his parents and invited him to the audition. He was very excited about having the opportunity to act in a movie. I never gave him the script since I didn't want him to learn any line by heart. I only gave him an outline of the story and we had some rehearsals before we started the shooting. Misha's mother, played by Valery Tscheplanowa, is a professional actress from Russia living in Munich, thus also an immigrant. It was very important for me that both main characters were immigrants in real life and could relate to their role. Valery took some Greek lessons to learn some

basics. Thanasis Papageorgiou, who plays Mr Nikos, is a well-known theatre actor, living in Athens, who had only limited cinema experience. The interesting thing was that he spoke neither English nor Russian, and Valery didn't speak Greek, so that there was no real communication possible between these two persons – which very much corresponded to their relationship in the movie. I was the go-between for them.

**MR NIKOS WAS A STAR ON GREEK TELEVISION WHO, AS A TEACHER, PRESENTED A VERY POPULAR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR KIDS. THERE'S ALSO A TELEVISION SERIES CALLED "POOR VERA" WHICH PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF SOFIA AND MISHA, AND I HAD THE IMPRESSION YOU'RE ALSO USING POPULAR SONGS – NOT ONLY GREEK SONGS, BUT ALSO THE FAREWELL SONG OF THE MOSCOW OLYMPICS. WHY DO YOU USE SO MANY REFERENCES TO POPULAR CULTURE?**

Basically I decided to play with the theme of education. I've already mentioned the fairy tales. Together with songs they are among the first things a child listens to. I asked myself, "How do we educate the people of a nation?" Education is a core element in my reflection about society. In Greek schools you still can feel the government's effort to make children believe in the nation, Greek culture and civilisation, and to convey their propaganda. Education is the way a government prepares the citizens of the future, the citizens they want.

**SOME OF YOUR SONGS SEEM TO BE VERY EMOTIONAL**

There's one very emotional song, the one Mr Nikos and Misha dance to, together, after Misha returns from having run away from home. The singer of this song is Sofia Vembo; she has the same first name as my protagonist and "Sophia" means "wise" in Greek. Sofia Vembo is a symbolic singer in Greece, since she sings about victory over the Italians and Germans during the Second World War. I'm using education on the one hand, Greek history and propaganda on the other hand, to express what it means to be Greek and a Greek citizen. Popular artists often don't realise how politicians and politics are using and instrumentalising them. We have to bear in mind that in European countries such as Greece or Austria, far right movements are gaining influence. In a way my film is an attempt to respond to these political tendencies.



## HAVE YOU ALREADY DEVELOPED A NEW PROJECT SINCE “SON OF SOFIA”?

I am very glad that my third film has also received financing from Eurimages. This means my new project is about to take shape even if the coronavirus might disturb our shooting plans. I'm preparing my first documentary – a road-trip through Europe where we follow some characters who have to leave their original country in order to satisfy the basic requirements of life and death. We start out in Malta, where abortion is prohibited and women have to go to Italy. An Italian woman wants to have *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), which is not allowed for single women in Italy, so she has to go to Cyprus. In Cyprus the law forbids cremation and leads our next character to Bulgaria. And the cycle of life and death ends with the trip of a Bulgarian citizen to Switzerland, where euthanasia is permitted for him. I chose this surreal trip to reflect about Europe, about borders, about the meaning of Europe, and to raise awareness that despite open borders we do not have common laws regarding matters of life and death.

*“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.”*