

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY ATEF

**DIRECTOR OF “3 DAYS IN QUIBERON”,
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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BY TARA KARAJICA



Emily Atef © Peter Hartwig

Emily Atef was born in Berlin, worked in theatre in London and studied at the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin (DFFB). Her feature films include Molly's Way, The Stranger in Me and Kill Me.

Tara Karajica talks to Emily Atef about the situation of women in today's film industry and her last film “3 Days in Quiberon”, an elegant portrait of Romy Schneider, the biggest female star in Europe of her time, which recreates the seminal, final interview she gave in 1981. The film premiered in the Competition at the 2018 Berlinale and won seven Lola awards from the German Film Academy.

HOW DID “3 DAYS IN QUIBERON” COME ABOUT?

Well, it was actually the idea of French producer Denis Poncet who, unfortunately, passed away during the process. He was friends with Marie Bäumer, the actress who plays Romy in the film, and they had talked about making a film about Romy Schneider because she looks so much like her. In fact, she had been asked this a thousand times in Germany as she is quite famous there and everybody always talked about Romy Schneider. Marie Bäumer wasn't really interested in doing a biopic, in describing somebody's life in 90 minutes, but more in just a focus at the end of her life. I

would also never have accepted if it were a biopic. So, he found Robert Lebeck's pictures and Romy Schneider's last German interview. Denis Poncet was looking for a German-speaking filmmaker because it was the last German interview with German protagonists. I am represented by the same agency as Marie and she really liked my recent film work. And, as Denis told me later, because of the fact that my films often depict women in crisis trying to find solutions, he felt I could be the right person to write and direct this film. The fact that I'm half French also helped because the film is set there and I would be doing my research alone in Quiberon, but mostly because of needing to write about this world surrounding Romy in France in the 1980s. I knew Romy Schneider because I grew up from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in France. I met her through her French films and was always fascinated, but had never thought of making a film about her. So after I got the call to ask if I was interested, I googled “Romy Schneider in Quiberon” and saw these pictures by Lebeck. And though she was a huge European star at that time, these pictures were not the pictures of an icon, a star, but the unfiltered pictures of a woman, without any make-up – a woman in crisis who is trying every means to break out of it and live life to the fullest. These pictures moved me. Then I read the interview, which is almost like psychotherapy, really. The

interviewer, the young and very ambitious journalist Michael Jürgs, goes to the limits of lack of respect in his questioning, and she goes that far too in totally opening up. And that blew me away. I really saw the possibility of making a film then.

DEPICTING A CINEMA ICON ONSCREEN IS CHALLENGING, ESPECIALLY ONE THAT HAS REVEALED HER CHARM AND CHARISMA IN COUNTLESS FILMS AND PHOTOS AND LEFT A SINGULAR MARK ON EUROPEAN CINEMA OF THE 1950S AND 1960S. IN THAT SENSE, WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN MAKING THIS FILM?

To be honest, I think what really helped is that I admired her a lot as an actress, but I wasn't a fan. I don't even know if I'm a fan of anyone. I love a lot of actors and actresses, but am not a fan. It wasn't as if I was

"3 DAYS IN QUIBERON" IS NOT A TYPICAL BIOPIC, NOR IS IT A FILM ABOUT HER CAREER, OR AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ACTRESS OR HER MYTH, BUT MORE A PORTRAYAL OF A WOMAN WHO HAPPENS TO BE A STAR. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSUMPTION? WHY DID YOU OPT FOR THIS PARTICULAR WAY OF APPROACHING THE FILM?

Yes, exactly. For me, a biopic is trying to tell the whole life story and I have real problems with biopics. I like to read autobiographies or biographies, but a 90-minute film trying to tell a life story where you use four actors to play the kid, the teenager and the older lady, and where you only have the ups and downs frustrates me as a member of the audience. I need time. What I want to do with my films is that I want the audience to feel as if they are there with the protagonists and not just rushing through. I'm allowing them to be there for



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touching an icon and I think that would've been more difficult. If someone had asked me to make a film about David Bowie's last interview, maybe I would've been like: "F%*k!" Whereas here, it was the woman that interested me and the things she was going through were very modern, universal themes like struggling with trying to be a good mother, being there for her children, but also having to make one film after the other to earn money since she was a single mother. She was the only one to bring in money and, as well as this, she had been a star since she was 14, so she needed the limelight and the admiration of her fans and directors to feel loved.

three days with Romy Schneider because it's her last interview and she talks so much about her whole life. Even if you don't know Romy Schneider, it's alright. She is the symbol of a public person who got famous extremely young like Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, Judy Garland or Justin Bieber, someone who is in the limelight so young and who doesn't learn to protect him/herself. But on the other hand, she is not a victim. She is a very strong character who knows exactly what she's doing and she knows the power she has in moving people. But what interested me really was this 42-year-old woman in a crisis and trying

to get out of it. Most of my films are about that, actually, about women in an existential crisis and doing everything to get out of it and usually succeeding. There's always hope and the shimmer of possibility and light (even if small) at the end of my films.

YOU PORTRAY HER AS REAL, FLAWED, OPEN-HEARTED – BASICALLY HUMAN. HER LINE "I'M NOT THE WOMEN I PLAY IN MY FILMS. I'M AN UNHAPPY 42-YEAR-OLD WOMAN AND MY NAME IS ROMY SCHNEIDER" IS POIGNANT AND SUMS IT ALL UP PERFECTLY. BUT HOW DO YOU SEE HER?

She's a very fragile woman in a very fragile situation and always needing people around her. I see her as somebody who was huge and extremely loved by the

audience and by directors, as somebody who wasn't protected as a child, so she herself never learned to protect herself. She never learned to separate her private life from her public life. She says herself in the interview that since she stopped going to school at 14 because of the *Sissi* trilogy, she became the biggest star in Germany and Austria in the 1950s and was only surrounded by adults. There was no time to play with her girlfriends or have a normal babysitting job. There was no time to even get bored, as she was shooting one film after the other, surrounded by adults telling her what to do. That struck a chord in me in how important it is to have that structure, that balance at the beginning of one's life, to be able to cope with the challenges that it brings.

IN THAT SENSE, YOUR FILM POSES THE QUESTION: HOW SHOULD A STAR REVEAL HERSELF PUBLICLY? IS THAT RIGHT?

Yes. It's also about manipulation and how far one can go. The press tried to enter her soul looking for all the grit and dirt in order just to sell magazines. Her best friend is an important character who tries to protect her, but does not succeed. However, though Romy seems like the journalist's victim, she knew exactly what she was doing. She knew he was touched by her so much that he gave her the final cut. She could have just taken the interview and put it in the bin, but she didn't, even though she went so far in the interview in her revelations and it was not something that was going to bring her peace. The title of the real *Stern* interview wasn't: "I love my children. I love my job". The title was: "At this moment, I'm totally broken". Of course, that sold millions of magazines and that was not something that was going to make you find yourself again.

ACCORDING TO YOU, HOW MUCH DID THE FACT THAT YOU ARE A WOMAN HELP YOU UNDERSTAND ROMY SCHNEIDER AND MAKE A FILM ABOUT HER FROM A FRESH PERSPECTIVE?

I don't know what kind of film a man would have made. But what was really important for me was this female friendship between Romy and her friend. I met the real friend a few times, but she didn't want any-

thing to do with the project. I don't think I would've made the film without that friend character because, for me, this female intimacy and this female friendship were really important. I didn't just want Romy and the men and Romy and the press. Maybe a man wouldn't have found this that important. I don't know. I went back to this woman and asked her whether she would allow me to create a totally fictional friend with another name and another nationality. So I made her Austrian and gave her another name, another career, another family situation and she accepted. And that was the best thing that could have happened because the friend, Hilde, is the only totally fictional character who I could really use as I wanted. Hilde was a little bit my vision of it as if I were the friend; she is the link with the



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audience. I think that most audience members have these feelings of Hilde trying to protect Romy from the press, from this journalist, to protect her from herself when she's drinking and not succeeding, because you can't change somebody unless they want to change themselves.

HOW DID YOU RESEARCH THE FILM AND HOW ACCURATE IS IT? HOW DID YOU PREPARE THE FILM?

I looked at a lot of interviews and I worked on that real interview. I talked to people who were there during these three days in Quiberon, I read about her life and then I tried to forget it all and make this fiction. For example, I rewrote the interview. There are a lot of citations from the real interview and there are also citations from other interviews. And then, for exam-

ple, I would talk to Michael Jürgs, the journalist, and he would just recount anecdotes that I would then use. I made him into a bigger antagonist than he really was even though the real interview goes really far. He wasn't a choir boy. I didn't want to make a documentary or a reportage, I wanted to make something fictional inspired by these events and then forget it because I wanted it to be free. I met Robert Lebeck the photographer two or three times. He, unfortunately, was quite old and passed away in 2014. He and his widow gave me all the rolls that he did during those days. There are around 20 pictures that are out there, in his books or on the internet, but they gave me 580 pictures, so there were 560 pictures that nobody had ever seen. It was an amazing treasure – some pictures are totally unfocused where they were too drunk at the bar or where he's measuring the lights, as well as very, very intimate pictures and pictures of the other characters.



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And with regard to Marie Bäumer and her interpretation, she was extremely afraid of playing this role. The important thing for both of us in our preparations was not trying to imitate. She will never be Romy Schneider; she's an actress playing her. I tried not to talk about Romy too much because it was so heavy for her. The film is about a 42-year-old woman who's a European star and who's going through this crisis. And the less I spoke about the icon, the freer she was. Of course, she did her work, she watched a lot of interviews and she worked on her voice and some of the gestures. Because there were a lot of fictive scenes like in the bathtub or at the bar, she was freer. For example, at the end, Romy Schneider writes something on an inter-

view she was given to read and Romy Schneider was right-handed while Marie is left-handed and Marie asked me whether she should practice writing with the right hand. And, I said: "No, we don't care about that. You're not Romy Schneider. It's not important." The important thing is the essence of what's happening in that scene and being there while she's reading it, and feeling what she's feeling. I think that helped her a lot and, funnily enough, the fact that she was free with all her preparations worked really well and she's amazing in the film. Sometimes, she's extremely close to Romy Schneider, but I only realised that in the editing.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE FILM'S AESTHETIC AND THE CHOICE OF MAKING IT IN BLACK AND WHITE?

I didn't really think about it. It just came so viscerally, so naturally, because I was given all the rolls of film and I had 600 black and white amazing pictures with a lot of contrast – with blacks that are really black and whites that are really white, which I love! I spent so much time looking at those pictures before I even started writing. When I started writing, I could just see black and white in my mind. I just couldn't see colour. And also, I thought, because it's *à huis-clos* and it's an interview, that it would be more concentrated in black and white rather than having all this colour around. I wanted it also to be as different from a TV reportage style film on Romy Schneider as possible. I wanted it to be fictive and black and white is fictive. Even the films she did at the time were in colour.

CAN IT ALSO BE SEEN AS A KIND OF TRIBUTE TO CLASSICAL CINEMA, TO CINEMA ICONS THAT STARRED IN FILMS THAT WERE BLACK AND WHITE IN ITS BEGINNINGS?

If it weren't Romy Schneider, I don't know if I would have even thought of that. It wasn't really that, because the films that she did that really moved me – like all the Claude Sautet films she made – were the colour films. Marlene Dietrich probably also did colour, but the ones in black and white just stick to her whereas with Romy Schneider not so much. If I were going to do a biopic on David Bowie, I would never think of black and white. I would right away want colour because he is so colourful. In the case of Romy Schneider, it wasn't

the fact that she was a cinema icon. It does help, though. It does help because I saw when I watched the film that it has something timeless. And it does have something very cinematic, graphically speaking – especially the black and white in which we shot it.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SHOOTING PROCESS?

We had a bit more than 30 days of shooting, which was amazing. All the outside shots are in Quiberon. The hotel is *the* hotel and the rocks are *the* rocks. It was magical. But we built the inside scenes on an island in the Baltic Sea because I really wanted to have an island atmosphere with the actors and the team. I wanted us to hear the ocean, to be next to the ocean, to not be able to leave, in a way, this claustrophobic atmosphere. We always walked to the set, crossing the beach. We got the green label because we used so few cars. We just walked all the time, in Quiberon and in Germany. That was really magical. What was also magical was my meeting with Thomas W. Kiennast, the Austrian cinematographer who I had not known before. I've only seen one film of his that I really liked and we are very different. He is very much into more commercial films. This was his first art-house film and we didn't have the same film references. So, at the beginning, I was a little anxious, thinking: "Oh my God! Is it going to work?" He is a very instinctive cinematographer and without much talking, without much intellectualising, he just felt it. And I loved his camera, his framing, his sensibility.

The work with the actors on the set was not always easy, especially with Marie Bäumer because she was plagued by this fear of not succeeding in breaking through the iconic image to touch the woman that was Romy Schneider. She didn't sleep and she was fragile but determined to get through the shoot. With the distance of the editing room, I realised it probably helped her interpretation. She is an amazing actress, anyway. You have to be. But it probably also helped that she was in that kind of distraught fear emotionally and very fragile, just like Romy Schneider was during those days. But for a director, that's very difficult because you need to get your film, and you also need to be there for other actors and your team and when your main actress is so fragile, you have to give more because she

can just break and then it's over. So that was very challenging. When Marie saw the film months later for the first time, the suffering she had gone through during the shoot came back, but during the second screening it was forgotten and she could appreciate her work and that of her colleagues. I was relieved and happy about that. I think this quartet, these four actors, are really incredible. I was lucky.

YOU WON SEVEN LOLA AWARDS FOR THIS FILM. COMMENTS?

We were nominated for ten Lolas, but I didn't dare to think about it because, sometimes, you get nominated for loads and you don't get any. It was just amazing because it was the most beautiful categories! We had Best Film, Best Director, Best Actress, Best



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Supporting Actress for the friend, Best Supporting Actor for the journalist, Best Camera and Best Music. You felt that the German Film Academy really, really loved the film and it proved that upper art-house cinema touches people, because it's a film in black and white, it's

à *huis-clos* and not an action film or a comedy and, like you said, it could've been a bit dangerous to try and touch this icon. We realised it worked and what's wonderful is that it's working in the cinema right now in Germany, this pretty small country where more than 290 000 people have already seen the film. Winning these prizes and also being in the Competition at the Berlinale helps get the buzz around the film for people to come see it because that's what we want to do; we want audiences to come and see it and be moved. It

also helps me, of course, for my future films – it's easier to get financing and that's important.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF DISCUSSION ABOUT WOMEN IN FILM THIS PAST YEAR AND A HALF. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE MATTER?

I definitely think it's finally changing a bit. The change will be when it's 50/50 and it will really change when nobody cares if it's a man or a woman, when it's just about the story. And right now, women do need more help, because jobs are not being given equally – that's the bottom line. There are amazingly creative women and some maybe still need to feel stronger, so one needs to help them more. The more you make films, the more you learn. It's like that with everything. You can't become an amazing filmmaker if you only get to make one feature film. You *can* make an amazing feature film, though, but women need to work, they need to earn their money and they need to shoot. I'm saying things are changing and that is good, but I find that it's still too slow. Thanks to movements like ProQuote Film in Germany and through #metoo and Time's Up, it has changed and it's more in the vocabulary, but it hasn't *really* changed concretely, in the numbers. In America, there aren't that many female directors that are up there, being pushed. And in Europe? A few more.

I personally find that there should be a quota for anything that's state funded, because women pay taxes as much as men and that goes into state funding. If we don't set quotas, it's going to take another 200 years to be where we want to be. And for us female filmmakers it's boring to talk about it all the time, to be the victims, to be the ones asking for something and that's why I think there needs to be a quota. There will be a big outcry at first, and then people will get used to it and then they realise: "Guess what? Films aren't worse! They are actually better! There are new stories being told, new perspectives!" The mediocre male filmmaker will maybe work less, but the talented male filmmaker does not have to fear for his work because if he's good, he's good. Every artist apparently strives towards equality and nobody would openly deny this, so male filmmakers should voice their support more. Male filmmakers with daughters will probably have more of an ear because they want their child to have the same opportunity as any other child or growing adult, regardless of their gender. We also need more women in high positions but women who are feminists, meaning they are interested in an equal society.

Women who are in higher positions have much more power to break this 2 000-year pattern we have been living in. These women should lead with their female attributes and not try to be exactly the same as men in high positions, who tend to want to please men and sometimes not let the women surrounding them prosper.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL ADVOCACY ON THE SUBJECT?

The first main thing I do is that I try to write about women characters who are not stereotypical women. I'm really into writing about women who are not always sympathetic, who are multi-layered, troubled but searching for a way out. That, I think, is really important in order to show other perspectives on human beings who are also women. We don't have much of that. I really missed that growing up – that I didn't have any female heroes to look up to as a child. Secondly, I voice it a lot on set. I don't just work with female crews, but a lot of people around me are female. I love working with women. Many of my producers are female. Most of my co-writers are female. My set designer is female. Most of my cinematographers and sound designers until now were male. When I teach at film school as a guest teacher, I talk about it and I try to encourage the female students, but also the male students. I also try to educate my daughter this way.

"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."