

**INTERVIEW WITH HANA JUŠIĆ**

**DIRECTOR OF “QUIT STARING AT MY PLATE”,  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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**LOOKING BACK AT YOUR FIRST FEATURE FILM “QUIT STARING AT MY PLATE”, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE BIGGEST LEARNING LESSON YOU TOOK FROM IT?**

I think I could have done some things better, in terms of script-writing and preparing for the shooting. Now I am five or six years older, it was a coming-of-age movie which I am too old to make again. The initial premise is not as appealing to me anymore but, at the time, there was nothing more important than to make this film about the emancipation of a young woman. I wouldn't have done things differently then. I hope I have learned something and improved my skills on set. Back then I was quite slow, confused and very afraid; I feel I have grown stronger in these five years. But I have not done a feature film again since then, so maybe I would repeat all those mistakes, although I'm older and hopefully wiser now.

**WAS THIS FILM AN EXPRESSION OF YOUR YOUTH?**

The main character in the film is based on me in some ways. As the main protagonist of the film, I used to have problems with communicating with the outside world, with my own self-expression. I did not feel entirely free; I felt rather constrained. Telling your own story is quite common for first-time features for young filmmakers. The more personal it is, the more vivid it makes it for the audience. Today, I have different

problems, I cannot relate to these young adult issues.

**DO YOU FEEL CONSTRAINED BY CROATIAN SOCIETY?**

Well yes, the Croats do not like to keep their distance from one another, especially in south Croatia, where my family comes from. They are warm and friendly people but, at the same time, this warmth can be suffocating. This type of over-curiousness, imposing your own values on others can be smothering. I wanted “Quit Staring at My Plate” to show a character trying to break away from that choking mould, yet I did not want to be unrealistic. I did not want my character to be successful in her quest for freedom, because people are rarely successful in shutting out the rest of the world from their personal lives and able to feel truly free and liberated. I wanted to show a character who has made some baby steps towards that freedom.

**ARE YOU ALSO REFERRING TO WOMEN IN GENERAL?**

Absolutely. When I was younger, I wasn't very much aware of gender biases. I decided the main character was going to be female because I am female. But when I started shooting, it suddenly came to me that this story is about forms of injustice happening because of the fact that this character is a girl. Now that I have grown up, six years later, I am more aware of all the issues that concern women. This is proba-

bly because of the current feminist contexts, but also because I have been able to educate myself more.

### **DO YOU THINK THE RECEPTION OF YOUR FILM HELPED YOU SEE DIFFERENTLY?**

When we had screenings all around Europe, young women would come up to me and say: “Your film helped me a lot because I have a similar situation at home.” But then there were critics arguing that the main character is not very likable, that she is rude to everyone for no apparent reason and, therefore, why should any viewer show any interest in her? Another asked why anyone should have to bear watching her changing her menstrual pads. There were comments about how she is not funny or sweet. At first, I was offended and surprised. Why can’t my character be good enough to make a film about her? And then I began reading about the so-called “unlikable female character syndrome”, female characters who don’t fit the damsel in distress mould or who seem unsympathetic, which some viewers just cannot seem to handle. Then, I discovered the film “Wanda” by Barbara Loden and realised it was fine to have an “unlikable” female protagonist – it can still be a great film.

### **DID THIS INSPIRE YOU TO MAKE ANOTHER FEATURE FILM?**

I had a huge crisis after doing this first feature. It was well received, so then I felt pressure to give the public the same, if not better. At first, I was positively surprised by its acclaimed reception because I come from a small country and we don’t have a big cinema industry. I enjoyed travelling to present my film, I was proud to screen it in different festivals. Then all of that travelling abruptly stopped. I was left alone very suddenly. I grew depressed because I thought that I would never come up with another idea like this again. It was a story that I had spent years making, and it was personal. I felt like I had no other story to tell. It took me a long time to come up with a story that I am satisfied with, that I am convinced would make a great feature film. Finally, I found something I am certain I want to shoot.

### **WHAT IS THIS NEW IDEA?**

I studied comparative literature and I really liked Victorian novels, and I realised that Croatian cinema lacks good period feature films. I wanted to make a film set in the early 20th-century rural Croatia, a setting that inspires me to show its cruel but fascinating nature: wolves and storms, scorching sun and sizzling rocks outside, and a closely knit community sleeping warmly inside, suffocating each other. The main characters are an isolated community of shepherds in a village at the foot of Dinara mountain. It is about a Chilean woman named Teresa who shows up in this village. The village is deserted since everyone went up for the summer pastures. They left behind only Milena, a sick girl who cannot work hard. The story will focus on both women interacting with each other, yet not understanding a word of what they say as they don’t speak each other’s



“Quit Staring at My Plate”

language. Despite being from two different planets, their isolation pushes them to find means to communicate. I like the idea that it is a film where characters do not have mobile phones yet live lives that we can relate to. I want it to be mystical, for it to be a folkloric tale deeply immersed in poetry and dark romanticism.

### **WHAT ARE THE MAIN ISSUES YOU WANT YOUR FILM TO ADDRESS?**

Throughout the film, I would like to explore the popular Catholic mysticism, its darkness and its kitschy moments I have always found compelling. The fact that the lives and cruel deaths of martyrs are often presented as something on the verge of fetishist masochism or psychotic hallucination fascinates me. When I was a girl, I went through a phase of Catholic

fanaticism, and I remember having masochistic fantasies about being chopped into pieces, seasoned and garnished, and then served on a giant silver plate at a feast. Another theme is powerful female leads. In my previous film “Quit Staring at My Plate”, I was interested in a female character that is strong but reticent and terse, not talking much. Here I want to portray a strong woman who has also been dealt a poor hand in life, but who has learned to fight and never look back. I was inspired by Judy Davis’s character in Gillian Armstrong’s “My Brilliant Career”, or the character of Andula in Milos Forman’s “Loves of a Blonde”.



“Quit Staring at My Plate”

### **ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO SHOOTING?**

Recently I went to the mountain of Dinara with my costume designer and Director of Photography to do some scoping for the shoot, and being in nature has had an incredibly fulfilling and inspiring impact. I have never spent much time in the mountains in my life; I am more of an indoor type of person. But in nature, I have been able to see myself and my ideas more truthfully, I cannot wait to shoot in this isolation. In terms of the atmosphere between the crew and everyone on the ground, it might be that we end up killing each other though but I am sure something great will come out of it.

### **I AM CURIOUS, HOW DID YOU END UP DIRECTING FILMS?**

I don’t know how it happened. I was shy and an introvert, yet somehow I loved watching films, even though I didn’t grow up in a family with an artistic background. Still, we all love films in my family, even my grandmother who did not even go to high school.

It was a form of education for me. At some point, I dreamt of making films but did not dare pursue it for a very long time. Then one day, I realised I would be eternally unhappy if I did not pursue my dream.

### **HOW DID YOU REALISE?**

It is a funny story. I had this boyfriend in university who was a really successful poet. He still is, and he is also an accomplished book author. We were together for many years and I realised that I was becoming very envious of his success. I grew frustrated with myself and I started hating him for doing what he liked and for being so self-confident. I was this woman in the shadow – no courage to act upon my desires. I was twenty-three at the time and I remember him telling me to do something about my frustration, that my complaints were becoming unbearable. And so, I tried and did just that.

*“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.”*