

INTERVIEW WITH ICIAR BOLLAIN

**DIRECTOR OF “YULI”, A FEATURE FILM
SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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Iciar Bollain © Héctor Garrido

“YULI” IS INSPIRED BY THE LIFE AND CAREER OF AN ARTIST AND ALSO BY THE BOOK HE WROTE ABOUT HIS OWN LIFE, “NO WAY HOME”. IT IS A STORY BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION AND MAYBE A BIT OF A FAIRY TALE. WHAT WAS THE INSPIRING ASPECT OF CARLOS ACOSTA’S LIFE THAT MADE YOU CHOOSE HIM AS THE SUBJECT OF A FEATURE FILM? HOW DID YOU, IN COLLABORATION WITH YOUR SCREENWRITER, PAUL LAVERTY, DEVELOP A BALANCED APPROACH BETWEEN THE REAL-LIFE BACKGROUND AND STORY-TELLING FOR THE BIG SCREEN?

One of the challenges of a biography or biopic is not to be repetitive or linear. Paul Laverty did an amazing job with the screenplay, first of all by choosing what to tell about the story of Carlos’s life. He focused on his childhood and youth, devoting less time to his professional success, which was implicit in any case. That way there was time to develop the early part of Carlos’s life and his very intense relationship with his father. Paul had to make the most difficult choices with the script by asking where the spine, the spirit of the story, was located. And then, of course, Paul invented a whole new reality with Carlos, creating a choreography of his life in the present in a theatre in Havana, with his company. Even though Carlos is a choreographer and director

of the company, the dance part of the film is scripted and created for the film. This allows us to tell much more, going beyond pure biography, and it also breaks the linear narration which is always a dangerous point in biopics. When we showed the film to Carlos he confirmed that he had the impression of watching himself – the best thing that could happen to us.

DID CARLOS ACOSTA BECOME PART OF THE PROJECT AT A VERY EARLY STAGE? WHAT WAS HIS INPUT?

Carlos Acosta, along with the British producer Andrea Calderwood, asked Paul Laverty to write a script. Paul and I had agreed to do our next film together after “The Olive Tree”, so we came in as a team, which was welcomed by Andrea and Carlos. From the very beginning Carlos trusted us; he said: “My skills are dancing, your skills are making films, so go ahead; I’m not going to interfere“. We obviously interviewed him; we went to Havana to see him working with his dancers and meet his teacher and family. Then Paul developed the script and we sent it to him, and he absolutely loved it. Carlos briefly considered doing the choreography for the film himself, but then he realised he was going to be too busy (he runs his company in Havana, lives in the UK, tours and still dances!). So we needed someone to

do that, someone he trusted, and we thought of Maria Rovira, a Catalan choreographer who had worked with him before and has a style of choreography which suits the film very well. Before the shoot I worked on the choreographies with her and we travelled to Havana twice to work with the dancers in creating the pieces. When we suggested Carlos should play himself in the film he was uncertain about the idea at first, but in the end he decided to go for the challenge. I was very confident he could do it – he’s very natural with the camera – and in fact he did a great job. He arrived in Havana after a long tour while we were shooting scenes of his childhood and youth, so he wasn’t in the shoot except for his own scenes. Working with him was great: very easygoing and trustful. And I’m very grateful for his trust.



“Yuli” © Denise Guerra

THE LANGUAGES OF CINEMA AND DANCE ARE BOTH BASED ON MOTION AND THEY ARE OFTEN COMPARED. DID YOU GIVE SPACE TO BOTH LANGUAGES IN YOUR NARRATION? WHAT WERE THE MOMENTS WHEN YOU PUT DANCE IN THE FOREGROUND? WHY DID YOU CHOOSE A DANCER TO PLAY CARLOS’S FATHER?

To film the dance for the film was one of the biggest challenges. I very much enjoyed being part of the process of creating the dance. I was in Havana with the choreographer Maria Rovira, working along with her and the dancers, because those dances were part of the film; they had to depict moments and emotions in Carlos’s life. They were scenes as much as the fictional ones. In fact, in many cases they are intertwined in

the film. Our aim was to tell Carlos’s emotions through the dancers, and to do it in such a way that we never lost the audience and halted the storytelling. On the contrary, the dance adds to the narration and pushes it forward. This was the most beautiful process of the filmmaking. I realised how difficult it is to shoot dance, to have the entire movement within the frame without getting too far away and becoming theatrical. You have to keep filming in a cinematic way without losing the movement. We found our method by being on stage with the dancers; sometimes we keep a distance, sometimes they come very close. We are close enough to capture their breathing, their sweat, the effort, the sound of their feet on the floor. Through film we give the audience the opportunity to see dance in a different way, while bearing in mind that there was a story to

tell about Carlos’s life. Probably that’s what makes the film so different. Carlos dances the character of his father in two of the choreographies, which was quite a challenge for him, since one of the dances recreates a terrible beating his dad gave him as a child.

And then, for the character of the father in the film, we chose Santiago Alfonso, who is himself not an actor but a choreographer. This was because there are very few black actors of this age in Cuba. We couldn’t find anyone strong enough and with the presence we needed for the part, so we opened up the casting to other people like mu-

sicians, older dancers, anyone with charisma to play the part. Santiago Alfonso, now 77, used to be the choreographer in the famous Cabaret Tropicana. He is a sort of institution in Cuba, and he had the gravitas his part required. He wasn’t very experienced as an actor, but he worked very hard, and he comes across as the person we needed – a very strong, charismatic father.

CARLOS ACOSTA’S LIFE IS THE STORY OF AN OUTSTANDING ARTISTIC TALENT. ON TOP OF THAT, HIS RISE FROM A POOR FAMILY BACKGROUND TO AN INTERNATIONAL BALLET STAR IS ALSO STRIKING FROM A SOCIAL POINT OF VIEW. WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES CONVEYED BY HIS BIOGRAPHY WHICH MAKE HIS STORY MORE THAN A BIOPIC?

There are two remarkable things. One is that nowhere in the world could a black kid from a poor background

learn ballet. It's an expensive education. In Cuba, however, learning was free. That's a fact that Carlos keeps pointing out in interviews and expressing gratitude for. The other remarkable thing is the fact that Carlos is descended from slaves. His father's grandmother was the daughter of a slave in a sugar plantation, the Acosta Plantation. The fact that a descendant of a slave ends up at the heart of one of the most renowned dance companies at the heart of the Western world, in London, dancing the white prince, the prince of love – Romeo – is very dramatic. Carlos is not only one of the best dancers of his generation; he also broke taboos and opened a path for people coming after him. When he started his ballet career there were very few black dancers in classical ballet. Considering that, his success is more than a remarkable achievement.

DID YOU TRAVEL TO CUBA BEFORE THE SHOOTING? WAS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOUR VIEW ON CARLOS'S EARLY YEARS OF DANCE TRAINING TO DISCOVER HIS ROOTS AND TO SHOOT IN HAVANA?

I had been to Cuba many times over the years, for different reasons, so I knew it quite well. And yes, of course, making the film anywhere else would have been unthinkable. We actually shot the childhood scenes in Carlos's neighbourhood, just round the corner from his actual house. I went to Cuba many times while we were making the film. First I went there together with Paul to do some research and meet Carlos in his own environment, and to meet his teacher, an 80-year-old woman who is still head of the Cuban Ballet School. Later I returned to Cuba for the casting, which was a very long and difficult process, and then also for the creation of the choreographies together with Maria Rovira, since they needed to be done before the shoot. There was a further trip to Cuba with some of the crew to decide on the locations, and then finally we went there to do the prep and the shoot.

And now, a year later, we were back with the finished film for its premiere in the Havana International Film Festival. It was viewed at the Karl Marx cinema, which has 5 400 seats, by a full and lively audience who laughed, cried and gave the film a thunderous round of

applause at the end – the best reward we could have and an unforgettable experience!

THE TITLE "YULI" RECALLS CARLOS'S NICKNAME. WHAT KIND OF BACKGROUND DOES THIS NAME/TITLE REFER TO?

Yuli is the nickname his father gave him when he was a kid. If you go in Carlos's neighbourhood, where we actually shot, people remember him only as Yuli. His father claims that he is named after Yuli, an Indian brave who fought against the Spanish. Carlos's father also calls Carlos the Son of Ogun, one of the warrior gods in the Yoruba religion. Carlos's father was a very religious man, a strong believer, a Santeria from the Yoruba religion, which comes from the African tradition and continued after colonisation, hidden inside Christian symbols.



"Yuli" © Denise Guerra

ONE VERY INTERESTING ASPECT OF HIS STORY IS HIS SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE. WHY DO YOU THINK HE WAS SO RELUCTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIS OWN TALENT? IN HIS CHILDHOOD HE SEEMS TO HAVE BECOME A DANCER AGAINST HIS WILL.

Carlos didn't want to dance because he was a totally wild, free kid growing up in a neighbourhood very close to the countryside. In his autobiography you discover the free spirit of his childhood – stealing mangos from the neighbours and selling them to get a ticket for the cinema. He was a fantastic breakdancer and won numerous competitions on the streets. The father wanted to keep his son away from the street, from the

rough kids and their gangs. Then he learned about the ballet school, which was two and a half hours away. He had to take two buses to get there. A pretty wild and free ten-year-old, all of a sudden locked up in a classroom, having to put his leg on one side, on the other side, pull the leg up, etc., can't imagine anything more boring. And being a dancer also had a stigma; the friends in his neighbourhood abandoned him and called him a faggot. He had many good reasons for not wanting to dance. Since he kept escaping from school, he was finally sent to a boarding school. Once he was there, he had no alternative. But more importantly, he saw a professional dancer who came to perform for the kids in his school, who jumped and flew through the air. That was the moment when the penny dropped for Carlos. He was fascinated; he wanted to be like that dancer. He too wanted to fly in the air. And he also realised dance was the only thing he was good at. And all of a sudden what had been a jail for him became his refuge, his home. Dance became his friend.

DID YOU INTEND TO TAKE A CRITICAL LOOK AT AN EXTRAORDINARY (ARTISTIC) TALENT AND IN WHAT WAY IT MAY MEAN A BLESSING AND A CURSE, ESPECIALLY FOR A CHILD?

I guess whenever a person has a talent, everybody around pushes him to make him get something out of it. But maybe the talented person doesn't want to go ahead. There's a contradiction there, the "curse" of the talent. But I also wanted to talk about the sacrifice that developing a talent may mean. The fact that you're talented doesn't mean it's going to be easy. You only get to the top after enormous effort. You spend a lot of your life working hard and away from your loved ones. That's exactly what happened to Carlos. The success he has achieved is a huge reward. I think it was also important to show in the film the high price Carlos had to pay for his success, and the fact that fame also means being a target of the media, so you lose your privacy. Fame and success have their dark sides as well.

YOU TOO HAVE PERSEVERED AND SUCCEEDED IN AN ARTISTIC FIELD WHICH IS DOMINATED BY MALE COLLEAGUES. HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARISE YOUR TRAJECTORY AS A WOMAN DIRECTOR? DO YOU HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT YOU HAVE SMASHED THE GLASS CEILING? HAS IT BECOME EASIER NOW TO GET THE FUNDING AND WORKING CONDITIONS YOU WANT?

I have always made the films I wanted to, but it has never been easy to get the funding. Some of them were very demanding and I have always shot with very tight budgets. And it's getting harder. In this sense male and female filmmakers are in the same boat. There is a type of film, like "Yuli", which is endangered. It's a type of film which is mainstream in a way, but also with ideas in it. These kinds of "middle class" film are getting harder and harder to get to the cinemas. In Spain at least you either make a comedy, a thriller or an action movie – or you make something very personal and not very accessible. But accessible films with real, three-dimensional characters, with stories that are connected to our lives, like "Yuli", are getting harder and harder to finance. We did "Yuli" thanks to Eurimages, thanks to four countries that got together for a co-production and with a pretty modest budget, though it doesn't look like it, because we truly have done a lot with very little. I don't think this had anything to do with me as a female director; I think it has to do with a type of film that TV stations no longer support.

But there is something I'm aware of as a female director and that's the fact that it seems harder for a woman to get recognition than it is for a man. The great Italian writer Elena Ferrante recently wrote how hard it was to find a male writer who says he learned from a female colleague. I could say exactly the same about filmmakers. There seems to be a reluctance to admit respect for the artistic work of a woman. You'll hear men referring to male film directors a thousand times, but you'll hardly hear a filmmaker referring to a female director as an inspiration, unless it's another female director. And that is still a glass ceiling to smash, to attain full visibility and recognition for female work in the cinema.