

INTERVIEW WITH ILDIKÓ ENYEDI



Ildikó Enyedi © Hanna Csata

**DIRECTOR OF “THE STORY OF MY WIFE”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES**

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BY SARAH HURTES

THIS IS THE FIRST FILM YOU ARE MAKING THAT IS ADAPTED FROM A BOOK RATHER THAN AN ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY OF YOURS. WHERE WERE YOU WHEN YOU FIRST OPENED THE BOOK “THE STORY OF MY WIFE” BY MILÁN FÜST?

I was in high school. I was 16 and a passionate reader. This novel swept me away. The writer, Milán Füst is really larger than literature; he has such a piercing eye for those aspects of life that we all experience but no one really speaks about, not in film and not typically in literature. It touches very directly – without any philosophical pretentiousness – on the meaning of life. I adored his humour because it made it even more credible and approachable. I loved everything he wrote, but this book is his main achievement.

WHAT WERE YOU MOST STRUCK BY WHEN YOU READ THE NOVEL?

The literary texture is the main strength of the novel. It is something that you cannot, you shouldn't even try to recreate in film. In every sentence, there

are at least three layers of time. It is written in the first person. The main hero, Jakob Storr the sea captain, narrates the whole novel and he is in a constant self-reflecting, self-analysing mode. He is in a situation in the present and he is also trying to represent or explain the situation to himself, and, at the same time, he is remembering this whole moment from a distant time in the future. It shows how ephemeral, how fragile, our objectivity is. What we call reality – how illusory it is. For the film we had to find totally different tools instead of this linguistic tool.

YOU WROTE: “I WANTED THE LUXURY TO PERMIT MYSELF THE SAME SORT OF FREEDOM THAT MALE FILMMAKERS HAVE WHEN THEY CREATE STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THEIR FILMS”. COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

Well, there are some invisible ghettos. If you are a minority, which is sometimes not by number but rather by situation – such as being a woman often is, even today – when you are in that situation, you feel obliged to “serve the cause”. But me, even in other aspects,

in political ones, I always instantly refuse to be an activist. I am deeply, deeply thankful for activists because I enjoy the fruit of their work. But somehow, I feel suffocated, mutilated if I am tied and limited to certain topics. The world is wide, life is rich and I want to explore it freely, and I am ready to make sacrifices and put hard work into achieving this sort of freedom. This is a statement, this could be an example as well. Do your thing whatever the expectations are. Maybe, this way, I can give a different sort of example by just getting to do what I want, the way I want, and focus on topics that thrill me and that I can treat with passion. It is the same for a black filmmaker, etc. Please, let us make the films which interest us whatever their

WHAT DO YOU MEAN EXACTLY?

Well, we humans are very flexible and we can get used to new habits very easily. I used to give an example that is not about male/female relationships, to help to free the logic of it from the actual discussion. Let's have a look at how we treat children, for example. When I was a child in my school, it was acceptable and even expected that a teacher would hit a child to instill order. Now, that is unthinkable. So, in a very short time, we changed a habit. We can change our habits together. And that is what is happening now. And it is good and will transform the quality of life for men and women alike. In "The Story of My Wife" I will show a very male protagonist, in the sense that he's not just a man, but also that all his life and education happened in this very male world, on a boat. I want you to like him, to feel for him, to root for him – to deeply understand him.



"The Story of My Wife"

topic is. I am also an Eastern European filmmaker. There is a never articulated, never admitted expectation that an Eastern European director should come in with a very harsh and extreme auteur gesture or deal with a very heavy social topic. I can't demolish this expectation but, in a way, I wanted to permit myself the luxury of going where my curiosity leads me. My choice to adapt this novel has today an aspect that I never thought about previously. Although I was fighting for many years to make a film of this novel, now with the #MeToo movement, I realised it got a certain involuntary actuality. It could help dialogue instead of confrontation and draw attention to problems we should solve together instead of demonising a whole sex (the male one). I think that as a society, we can have very bad habits and very poisonous habits. We should focus on them.

I thought about all the wonderful men we know, our fathers and brothers, our lovers. Let them be men the same way as we want to let women be women, also in working environments where, for a long time, they were supposed to adapt male habits to succeed.

And, by the way, let everyone in between these two "extremes" be what they are. It is better for a society as a whole if all their members can happily be engaged in things that interest them, from astronomy to gardening, and not be obliged to hide, explain, represent or fight for or fight against their very own nature. I think it is important to draw the line not between man and woman but between those who are ready to change poisonous social habits and those who are not.

I WAS WONDERING IF THE STORY ABOUT TWO PEOPLE FALLING IN LOVE IN A MESSY AND COMPLEX WAY WAS SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO KEEP EXPERIMENTING WITH IN YOUR FUTURE FILMS?

To tell the truth, what interests me is rather communication. Love is always an extreme case of communication. In love, you become very sensitive, very vulnerable, very open and, at the same time, you become very imaginative. You are ready to see the

best part of another person, even if it's just a potential. I really adore the eyes of people in love. It would be great to see in each other that kind of beautiful potential. It can help the other person to really achieve the potential that is seen in them.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE WITH THIS FILM?

I would like to provide an evening that is entertaining, very easy to approach, but also with very personal involvement on the part of the audience. And then, if the film works the way I imagine, I hope it will stay with the spectator after they finished watching it, like a slowly burning effect, where all the hidden layers emerge later. During the screening I just want to immerse them fully in the story of these two people, and all the thinking and questioning can come later.

YOU'RE CURRENTLY IN PREPARATION FOR THE FILM. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CHOICE OF ACTORS?

We have a really wonderful cast. Gij Naber is present in every single scene. We go through this labyrinth-like Love story with him, we understand everything – setbacks, confusion, new hopes – through him. His approach is unique, his screen presence as well: a rare combination of power and vulnerability. He is far from the usual choice for a love story. The very nature of his character tells us half the story. It was very hard to find an actor who is so powerful, smart and, at the same time, has a sort of innocence, a very much male innocence. This is the key to the film.

Lizzy, his wife's role, is an unusually difficult one. From the beginning to the end of the film we don't know what is going on in her mind. It is very hard for an actor to build a character in such an indirect way, being consistent and real but unfathomable, unexplainable till the last moment. I am very lucky to have Léa Seydoux as an accomplice. I was touched during our first meeting when I realised how deeply and completely she understood the script, immediately and fully, all the hidden layers, the driving force of the script. I prepared myself for long explanations, because of the secretive aspect of Lizzy's character, but I didn't have to say anything.

Louis Garrel as Dedin, even if he appears rarely, is in a way always present in the life of this couple. He is the effortless charmer who, without doing much, drives Jakob crazy. He has the aura, that sort of maddeningly

intense presence which is untouchable, unapproachable. He wins the duel even without drawing arms.

Sergio Rubini and Jasmine Trinca, partners in crime, appear in the film at the decisive moments of Jakob's life with Lizzy. They are bold, sleek, ruthless and charming, two first class tricksters. Sergio is an amazing contrast to Gij. There is a sort of hidden duel between the two men with a potential for friendship. It is an important subplot of the film.

Luna Wedler is the young girl Grete, who offers Jakob a way out of the labyrinth with Lizzy. I was blown away by how complex and natural she was already in the first take we did in the casting session.

And in a tiny, but, for me especially cherished and important role, Josef Hader is Herr Blume, a janitor with philosophical inclinations. I am so glad he was game and accepted the role. When you cast for a small role, it is imperative to find outstanding actors who are able, even in their brief screen time, to give hints of this full character that they can't actually show. I'm very happy that he is with us.

I feel especially happy, because the actors have just responded to the script exactly as if they knew what was written between the lines.

THAT SEEMS LIKE A VERY INTERNATIONAL CAST.

Yes, the original novel which the film is based on plays very explicitly with different European characters. Every language represents a different way of life, a different approach to life. Seventy per cent of the film is in English, as it was the language used in international marine circles, but the rest of the film is in different languages: French, Italian, German. In every situation the characters speak the language which is logical and natural for them in the given situation. So language became a strong dramaturgical tool. It expresses power situations – who tries to speak the language of the other, who makes the first step to enter into the other person's territory, who dares to be vulnerable?

I KNOW THAT THE FILM IS SET IN THE 1920S AND I READ THAT YOU AIM NOT TO SHOW THE FLAPPER ERA AND INSTEAD BE MORE SUBTLE. CAN YOU ELABORATE?

At a first glance, this project could seem like a normal

period movie, although it is planned to be visually more raw, direct, energetic, definitely not the sort of film where everyone is very nicely dressed and the makeup is perfect. I have amazing colleagues for achieving that: Marcell Rév, Director of Photography, with his intense, piercing way of thinking, never going just for a style but always for a meaning; Imola Lang, a production designer and we have already had several adventures together – she was my extremely sensitive and inventive partner in “On Body and Soul”; Barbara Kreuzer, for hair and makeup, with her very raw and natural approach.

But, the main reason why it is not a regular period movie and not just a regular love story is more hidden. It lies in the – hoped for – effect on the spectators. I really would like not to force anything on them, not to explain, show or prove anything. I want to give them space to make their own discoveries. I just would like them to follow this seaman, Jakob Storr, in all his trials and tribulations, as his attempts to understand life show him weak, imperfect but likable and touching. All the rest should be the private inner discovery of the spectator.

MY LAST QUESTION, HAVING LISTENED TO YOU AND ALSO HAVING SEEN “ON BODY AND SOUL”, I WONDER— DO YOU DREAM MUCH?

It is changing with time. I was always very sensitive to places. For a certain period I was dreaming a lot and in my dreams I went back to the same imaginary places. Actually I have my own dreamed Budapest, a whole town where I am very much at home. It has the same structure as the “real” town, but it is much more colourful.