

Interview with Ines Tanović



By Tara Karajica
September 2018

Ines Tanović was born and raised in Sarajevo, where she studied dramaturgy before venturing into writing and directing. She has written and directed a number of short and documentary films, but her most notable work is the Bosnian part of the feature omnibus "Some Other Stories" ("Neke druge priče") (2010) and her critically acclaimed debut film "Our Everyday Life" ("Naša svakodnevna priča") (2015), which, apart from receiving Eurimages funding, has very successfully toured the film festival circuit and was the Bosnian candidate for the 2015 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

Tara Karajica quizzed Tanović about "The Son," her second feature that she is currently shooting about the inner afflictions of adopted teenager Arman and the everyday struggles of modern Sarajevo.

The topic of *The Son* is very tough – especially for audience members who are parents. Why did you choose this story? How did it come about?

Ines Tanović: I am a mother of two and while they were growing up I have often found myself thinking how difficult it is to be a parent, especially when the children enter puberty. Once, during an argument with my son, I thought I'd gladly throw him out the window because I was so angry with him! Then, I thought how even more difficult it would have been had I adopted this child, how I would have tackled this particular problem or other situations that are normal when children are growing up, if my own child knows how to push my buttons.

How do you see your protagonist Arman and his restlessness? How do you plan to portray him on the big screen and capture his restlessness in the language of film?

I.T.: The biggest challenge of this film has indeed been the casting of the lead character and his brother as well as his friends. My protagonist is not a hooligan. Actually, he is not a problematic kid; he just has an identity crisis that he expresses in different ways that upset his family and entourage. The leading role is played by Dino Bajrović and I am sure that he can bring his inner world to this role and appear at first like an angry teenager who, in reality, is an affectionate and warm young man.

In your director's statement, you say that through the characters of Arman and Dado and their generation, a city that is in search of its identity is also being portrayed; that Sarajevo should also be a character in the film. Why is this an important element in the creation of your leading characters?

I.T.: The story of my characters takes place precisely in contemporary Sarajevo and that defines how these characters behave because on the one hand they carry tradition and on the other, the burden of a society in transition much like the Bosnian one today. All this is interwoven in the script to convey in a subtle and straightforward manner the picture of our society today.

Through your often repeated cast (Uliks Fehmiu, Emir Hadžihafizbegović, Jasna Ornela Bery, and introducing Snežana Bogdanović), you wish to create your own authorial continuity in your storytelling. Can you explain this decision?

I.T.: First of all, I want to say that they are all great actors and great people who I want to work with because it is important for me to have a comfortable atmosphere on set, and one that encourages us to tell a good story together. When I come to think about my previous films, I really only follow one character: in the omnibus *Some Other Stories* (*Neke druge priče*), I have Haris, who has just broken up with his girlfriend, a foreigner he had met during the war. He is in his late twenties right at the end of the war and is fighting for his very existence. In *Our Everyday Life* (*Naša svakodnevna priča*), this character is replaced by Saša, who is in his late thirties and who has been unsuccessfully married to a woman he had met and loved during the war. He is a jobless war veteran who is living with his parents. He doesn't get along with his father because of the way he lives his life, and this is precisely the image of this lost generation in Bosnia today. In the new film, this character is now Senad, in his fifties, who has in the meantime become a father and is struggling with all the parenthood demons of modern Bosnian society, with the situation of his adopted child, his own child, as well as problems at work and in his marriage. In a way, I have unconsciously always followed the same character and the same family and that is why it's great for me to always have the same cast.



Shooting "The Son"

Therefore, in the film *The Son*, you tackle the third generation of these characters, the one that was born after the war and whose parents have been in it and have lost their loved ones. How have you come up with this and why? Does this mean that in order for us to understand *The Son*, we have to watch all your previous works?

I.T.: All of these films are stand-alone stories that literally lean on one another. So, *The Son* has to be entirely independent from the earlier stories, but it can also be watched in the context of the previous films. That way, we obtain a more complex image of Bosnia and our society.

In that sense, how is it to be a teenager in Sarajevo today? How big a change have you noticed since the war and your childhood and adolescence?

I.T.: These are the biggest changes I see. Somehow, family values have been lost because the parents are fighting for their very existence while the children spend more time alone and are being exposed to all the wrong life models. This engenders bad behaviour and lack of respect, experimenting with drugs and the urge for material values. Knowledge and education are not being valued at all any more as they do not bring in fast money and a comfortable life.

How is it to be a parent in today's Sarajevo? What changes do you see there? And why is it important for you to address this topic in your film?

I.T.: Because of everything I have just mentioned, it is very demanding to be a parent today, not only in Sarajevo but in general. Everything is somehow faster. The children are being fed an enormous amount of information they don't know how to process. In a technological sense, parents find it hard to follow their children, which leads to disparity. And everything is burdened by social and material statuses because children look at other people's profiles where they see photos of other people's lives presented in most cases in a false light. Everyone wants to look better than they really do and they try to unrealistically reach these standards. Most parents then fall into this trap where they want to satisfy their child materialistically and buy him/her the latest mobile phone, computer or clothes and they fall into a debt spiral because their salaries are extremely low. A very small number of people in Bosnia live comfortably and in accordance with their needs. This is why it is important for me to show in a way some of these topics that constitute our everyday life.

What is, according to you, a good parent?

I.T.: A good parent is one who listens to and understands his/her child and who tries to spend quality time with the child. A parent's love and attention cannot be substituted by shopping or the purchase of expensive material things.

In your director's statement, you say that you have set this story's plot in a "mahala" in Sarajevo, in a Bosnian house that Senad inherited from his parents. This house is a reminder of his origins but at the same time a burden because it always requires new investment. Also, through scenes of an Eid al-Fitr lunch you wish to show the Bosnian tradition of celebrating religious holidays in an urban family. Can you elaborate on these choices and explain how they and this framework within which the story unfolds affect the latter and the whole atmosphere of the film?

I.T.: Well, in our postwar cinema, most of the films tackle the war and its direct consequences. As an author, it is very important for me to tackle contemporary life and what this life is as a consequence of that same war – and the postwar poverty, the destroyed industry, the joblessness, the falling apart of a family... In all this, as an author from Sarajevo, it is important for me to show this environment in which I have grown up, a traditional "mahala" (neighbourhood) on the one hand, but also an urban family on the other. Actually, we have been living like this in Sarajevo for decades, with the coexistence of tradition, religion and the urban worldview. I think that people in the region or in the rest of Europe don't really understand this mix.

How will *The Son* look aesthetically? What will your costume and musical choices be? And what about the camera work?

I.T.: I am extremely happy with the shooting locations and buildings I have chosen. As I have been prepping for this film for a long time, I have had time to slowly put the film's image together in my head and how I wish this story to be told. Because it is about strong emotions in a family, I have opted for darker hues for the interior in contrast to an autumnal exterior. I will shoot all the scenes in one frame just as I did with my previous film, but with the exception that this time, the camera will be moving more. This concept of one scene-one frame enables me to bring out the sincerest and deepest emotions in my actors. As far as the music is concerned, I have chosen a song from our world-famous band, Dubioza kolektiv, and I hope that we will continue our collaboration as regards the rest of the film's original soundtrack.

What do you think of the situation of women in film today? What is the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in your opinion? This year, the Sarajevo Film Festival took another very important step towards gender equality in film...

I.T.: Well, it's a paradox that Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is deemed much more traditional in comparison to the other countries in the region, actually has extraordinary female directors and women in all sectors of the film industry. I am currently working with brilliant women on my film. My first and second director's assistants are women; the costume designer, the make-up artist and continuity are all women, as well as a number of assistants and two co-producers. I think that women are more organised and focused on the job they're doing. It's always a pleasure to work with colleagues and I don't make any distinction when it comes to gender. It's always very important that someone is a great author and collaborator. In my case, the majority of these are women. Of course, I absolutely agree that the situation of women not only in film but in general is a very significant concern and has to be protected in a formal way.