

INTERVIEW WITH IOANA URICARU

DIRECTOR OF "LEMONADE",
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

BY KARIN SCHIEFER

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Ioana Uricaru © Anette Hornischer

"Lemonade" revolves around a young Romanian woman who is a healthcare worker in the USA on a six-month visa that is about to expire. Hoping to ease her situation as an immigrant, she marries an American patient of hers. But when she takes on the immigration procedure she gets drawn into a spiral of pressure and dependency. Is "Lemonade", your first feature length movie, entirely based on real life experiences you collected in the course of your research, or is it half fiction and half reality?

Ioana Uricaru: Most of narrative elements are inspired by reality, while most of the dialogue is invented. The events in the script are all based on real situations that either happened to me or to people I know. Some were reported to me, meaning they're not first hand. Some of the (dramatically speaking) minor episodes happened to me – conversations, situations, reactions, such as the incident in the first scene when Mara gets a vaccine shot which she hadn't agreed to.

HOW DID YOU ESTABLISH A BALANCE BETWEEN THE REALITY-INSPIRED PARTS AND THE NARRATIVE REQUIREMENTS DURING THE WRITING PROCESS?

The writing process took about seven years, from an initial idea that was slightly different to the shooting

script. I started writing on my own and developed the script within the Sundance Screenwriters Lab and the Cinéfondation Residency. Once it was in decent shape, I started to look for funding, a process that took several years and caused a sort of gap in the evolution of the story. A few months before shooting, my co-writer and I undertook a solid rewrite. A main character inspired by reality always makes it difficult to turn her/him into a fictional character and to allow oneself to change things in order to make them more dramatic. With Mara as a fictional protagonist, I had the flexibility to move things around. For a script you have to condense events, take the liberty to combine things that happened to different people. There's always a negotiation going on inside you between the emotional responsibility towards your sources of inspiration and the requirements of a good script. Staying true to what actually happened might not be best for the movie.

YOU HAVE A VERY MEANINGFUL OPENING SCENE: AS PART OF THE IMMIGRATION PROCEDURE MARA IS GETTING A VACCINE SHE HADN'T GIVEN HER CONSENT TO. THIS IS JUST ONE DETAIL THAT SHOWS THE TRANSGRESSIVE EXECUTION OF POWER THAT IMMIGRANTS ARE EXPOSED TO. THE SCENE ALSO SAYS A LOT ABOUT HOW MUCH MARA IS IN NEED OF PROTECTION AND HAS TO PROTECT HERSELF. IT'S



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ONLY A SHORT SCENE, BUT IT ESTABLISHES AT AN EARLY STAGE A FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENT OF HER CHARACTER.

It was important to me to show her vulnerability in this first scene. Every medical check, even the most ordinary one, makes us all feel vulnerable. I wanted to start with her getting undressed, see her exposed, literally naked, and on top of that, she gets this shot she hadn't agreed to. There's also a parallel between the first and the last scene where she puts on a sort of work coat that reminds us of the hospital gown. I wanted to express something circular, not only for the sake of aesthetics. Ironically she ends up in a situation she absolutely wanted to avoid. She had thought that by marrying an American she would have a more straightforward process of immigration and she ends up doing exactly what she didn't want to do – living in a precarious situation, breaking the law, doing illegal work, being at the mercy of a guy who might help her but might not. In a certain way her vulnerability is greater in the end, even though she seems to have found some solutions. This connects very much with the way I felt during my own immigration process, although it was very smooth. Since you feel so vulnerable, you learn something about yourself; that you really are capable of doing things you swore in the beginning you'd never do. That's a humbling and frightening realisation about yourself. You know who you were and what you wanted, but you have to realise that you're capable of acting in total contrast to that.

"HOW FAR WOULD YOU BE PREPARED TO GO TO GET WHAT YOU WANT?" WAS ONE OF THE TAGLINES I READ ON THE "LEMONADE" WEBSITE. I HAD THE IMPRESSION THAT MARA IS UNDER SO MUCH PRESSURE THAT SHE LOSES ALL SENSE OF HERSELF AND THE INSTINCT OF SELF-PRESERVATION, SO SHE STARTS MAKING MISTAKES.

There's a scene in the film where she talks with her friend Aniko about the possibility of going back home. I interviewed a lot of immigrants and many of them told me the same thing: "You have to keep going and get used to the idea that turning back is not an option". Otherwise you'd quit at some point. In the context of your own life it may be very dramatic, even if it doesn't look that way from outside. Years of doing things all over again. You waste or at least invest (if it ends well) so much of your life and you finally realise that ten or fifteen years of your life have passed trying to get citizenship or a green card or a job. I know people who are close to an existential crisis, realising that this chase for legal status, a good job, a social position has eaten up so much of their lives. I even know people who dropped everything and went back to their country of origin just when they started to succeed, to get what they wanted so badly. Even if the process of immigration seems relatively smooth, there's an internal psychological drama going on – it's soul destroying.

On very different levels, "Lemonade" has huge social relevance: you're talking about the clash between the rich and the less rich countries of the Western



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world, you raise the issues of abuse of power by a public servant and the trap of men’s rule that Mara has stumbled into. Each of the men who she thinks might help her pulls her even deeper into a spider’s web. And you also point out the exodus of the younger generation from the eastern European countries.

I recently read an article stating that Romania is the country with the second highest rate of emigration after Syria. Close to four million people have left in ten years, all relatively young – some very qualified, others less so. That’s almost a quarter of the population. Romania has a tremendous labour force crisis and such a huge number of emigrants caught between two worlds. Many of them stayed in Europe. Those who went to the USA were generally highly skilled. A young woman who tries to find work as a healthcare worker in the USA is not a very typical case. Romanians who stay in Europe do not have the added problem of having to stay under the radar. The USA represents the more inaccessible country, the next frontier. There’s also a romanticised idea of going to the USA. Now that so many people have discovered Europe, the USA has become the new magic place to go. One question that keeps coming up in “Lemonade” is: why on earth is Mara doing what she’s doing? There’s a very powerful combination of a utopian desire and the stubborn belief that once you have acquired legal status or a good job, all your problems will be resolved. That concept is shared by a lot of immigrants. Many of them connect this ambition to their children. The first generation that leaves the home country sacrifices themselves: they are aware that they might have wasted their life in order to make

sure their children won’t have to go through all that. It comes as a terrible shock to them when their children don’t even speak Romanian, don’t identify at all with their Romanian roots and have a completely different attitude to the world. This increases the nostalgia and the feeling of alienation.

“LEMONADE” IS A VERY STRONG INDICTMENT OF MALE DOMINATION.

I didn’t set out to make a film about a woman surrounded by men who all take advantage of her. It came out naturally that way. Both from the relevant stories I heard and the dramatic logic of the film, it just turned out that way. At question-and-answer sessions I am very often asked, mostly by men, why all my male characters behave like arseholes. I see it differently: the Serbian lawyer is trying to help Mara, and her husband is very nice and supportive in the beginning. It’s a sort of mixture. It was not my intention to bash the male sex.

“LEMONADE” WAS PRODUCED BY CRISTIAN MUNGIU. HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK TOGETHER?

I’ve known Cristian Mungiu since film school. He also produced my previous work. I am one of the five directors of the omnibus project “Tales from a Golden Age”. Since “Lemonade” was set in the USA, it was not really his turf and I initially tried to get “Lemonade” made as an American independent film. But the fact that the main part was going to be played by an unknown Romanian actress made it difficult. Producers who were interested kicked around ideas about changing the setup, having a female lead from Central or South America.



“Lemonade” © Pluto Films



“Lemonade” © Pluto Films

But many situations in the film are strongly tied to the fact that she comes from a very specific country. At some point Cristian stepped in, since he liked the script, and we started exploring the possibilities of producing the film with his company. The US system is not adapted for co-productions, and Cristian’s know-how as a co-producer was very Europe-based. It seemed inconceivable that any European funding body would give money for a project shot in the USA. Thanks to my sound knowledge about the rules of the US immigration system I was aware that it would be impossible to shoot in the USA with a European crew. There’s no legal way to get a work visa for two months, even if the whole film team are employed by a Romanian company. It is unthinkable to shoot a feature length movie illegally in a sort of guerilla style. The Screen Actors Guild is very serious about regulations; they show up at your set and ask you how much you are paying your actors. If your protagonist doesn’t have a work permit for the USA, they shut down the filming. None of the production team would be allowed to set foot in the USA again. All my concerns were confirmed by a legal adviser. We finally found a solution with Canada, which at that time was on the brink of joining Eurimages. “Lemonade” is certainly one of the pioneer projects between Eurimages countries and Canada. There was a bilateral co-production agreement between Romania and Canada which meant that we were on solid ground in legal terms, and our crew members could apply for temporary work permits. Canadian national and regional funds were very generous and supportive, given the fact that our movie was not set in Canada and that the province of Québec basically supports French-speaking movies. It’s great that Canada is now part of Eurimages, since it opens up the possibility of shooting there if you need this North American world in your movie.

MARA, THE LEADING PART, CARRIES THE WHOLE FILM. HOW DID YOU FIND MĂLINA MANOVICI AS A MAIN ACTRESS AND WHAT WAS WORKING WITH HER LIKE?

I had seen her in Cristian Mungiu’s film “Graduation” where she played a supporting role. I auditioned a lot of actresses in Romania who were in their early thirties and could plausibly be the mother

of an eight-year-old boy. Mălina Manovici stood out. She’s not only a phenomenal actress, she also has the personality that makes it believable that her character was prepared to go through all this. In “Graduation” she has long hair and looks completely different, but she had extremely short hair at the time of the casting and I liked it, so we kept the short hair – and it added something to the vulnerability I saw in her character. We didn’t have a lot of time for rehearsing, since I had to prepare the shoot in Canada. Mălina not only has a great presence and talent but also an amazing technique due to her work in the theatre. She knew the whole script inside out, including the lines of her co-actors. She was extraordinarily professional and had a very grounded approach to her work.

WHAT’S THE IDEA BEHIND THE TITLE “LEMONADE”?

There’s a widespread American adage: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade”, meaning when you encounter hardship, you have to try to turn it into something sweet. That’s a very American approach to life: “You can make it! You have to find something positive in everything!” As somebody from an eastern European country, I perceived the expression as pretty cynical when I heard it for the first time. I had the impression that it puts a lot of pressure on me: if I don’t make it, I’m the one to blame. I think it’s very appropriate as a title, because it conveys the two sides of the coin.

“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.”