

INTERVIEW WITH IVETA GRÓFOVÁ

DIRECTOR OF "LITTLE HARBOUR"
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

MAY 2020

BY TARA KARAJICA



© Waldemar Švábenský

Iveta Grófová was born in Trenčín, Slovakia, in 1980. After studying animation and documentary, she obtained a doctorate from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. Her 2012 feature debut, "Made in Ash", was the Slovakian entry for the Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Foreign Language Film and was screened at many film festivals, including the Cottbus and Torino film festivals, where it won awards. She has also directed a short film as well as documentaries for television including "Blues pro sólo Matky" ("Blues for Single Mothers" – 2014). She founded Hulapa Film, a production company for author-driven films, in 2010.

Tara Karajica talks to Iveta Grófová about her second film, "Little Harbour", which premiered at the 2017 Berlinale where it won the Crystal Bear, as well as her filmmaking and women in today's film industry.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO FILMMAKING?

In high school, I studied fashion design. I've always loved drawing and painting and fashion design was the only opportunity to study art in my hometown. During my studies, I hated sewing and working with clothes. I preferred to illustrate children's books and magazines. Therefore, I chose to continue my studies at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, at the Faculty of Film and Television, where I focused on animated films and later on documentary films. There, I fell in love

with film and started experimenting with all its forms.

"LITTLE HARBOUR" IS BASED ON MONIKA KOMPANÍKOVÁ'S BOOK *THE FIFTH BOAT*. HOW DID THE FILM COME ABOUT?

I filmed a documentary portrait for television about Monika Kompaniková and her book *The Fifth Boat*. When reading this book, I found a powerful coming-of-age story. I was instantly drawn to the unique visual palette that was expressed in the text and knew immediately that this was a story I had to tell.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE ADAPTATION PROCESS?

Indeed, the book works with many themes and even with several timelines. For the purposes of the film, it was necessary to make the narrative simpler. That's why I decided to forget about the book for a while and, together with an experienced screenwriter, Marek Leščák, we started to build its story again. We focus on the story of the ten-year-old Jarka, her younger friend Kristian and their adventure.

HOW DOES "LITTLE HARBOUR" DIFFER FROM YOUR DEBUT FEATURE, "MADE IN ASH", THE SLOVAKIAN CANDIDATE FOR THE 2012 OSCAR FOR BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM?

My debut feature is very close to the real harsh



“Little Harbour” © Hulapa Film

story and it’s somewhere on the border between fiction and reality. In “Little Harbour”, it was a completely different approach. Here, I worked with a literary story which described the inner world of the main child protagonist.

“LITTLE HARBOUR” SHOWS AN ESCAPE ROUTE FOR LOVE AS WELL AS A WAY OF ESCAPING FROM THE CURRENT WORLD IN ORDER TO CREATE A NEW ONE. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT?

The main protagonist is ten-year-old Jarka living with a mother who is not yet ready to be one. Pushed by her desire for love and to form a fully functioning family, Jarka finds herself substituting as a “mother” for two babies. She forms a “family” with a boy named Kristian and together they hide from the adults in an abandoned garden shed. They play family as they believe one should look like. In the shed, Jarka and Kristian create their own pure world and form a tight bond, which they will carry throughout their lives. The film basically describes the lives of children who have a difficult childhood. This is a topic that we are all probably sensitive to and we don’t like to look at the suffering of children. However, this topic also brings a very positive message. The child can find a solution to feed his/her need to be loved. But this solution may seem strange and unacceptable to us adults.

THE FILM EXPLORES THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THREE GENERATIONS (GRANDMOTHER, MOTHER AND DAUGHTER). CAN YOU DELVE MORE INTO THAT?

It was important for me to tell the story of one childhood in the context of generational relationships, especially when it comes to generational relationships where men have disappeared. I liked the notion of a family burden that is continuously passed on from

parents to children until someone finally attempts to come to terms with it, thereby healing the family trauma. And Jarka tries to do just that. She copes with her family’s trauma in her own unique and hopeful way. That’s why I think “Little Harbour” is a film not just for children, but for families.

IN THAT REGARD, CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE MOTHERS IN THE FILM? THEY ARE MODELLED AFTER THE OFTEN USED TEMPLATE AND STEREOTYPE OF THE TOO YOUNG, UNFIT, IRRESPONSIBLE AND REGRETFUL MOTHER.

Yes, this kind of mother is often shown in movies. However, I have the impression that the grouping of a too young, youthful mother with an adult child is also the often used template in real life. In this film, the characters of adults are quite simplified – schematic, as if observed by a child.

YOU OPT TO USE A CHILD’S INNOCENCE TO DEPICT THE CORRUPTION OF THE ADULT WORLD AND YOU USE THE POINT OF VIEW OF A CHILD. HOWEVER, DESPITE THE CHILD BEING THE PROTAGONIST, IT IS NOT ENTIRELY A CHILDREN’S FILM. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT CHOICE?

This is the story of a child’s adventure. It’s an insight into the world of adults through the eyes of children and a glance into the world of children that adults cannot see. I tried to unleash and play with the viewer’s emotions during the scenes, mostly where the children take care of the little babies. A child viewer sees a poetic children’s adventure, but an adult viewer sees drama, imagines the possible consequences of this dangerous game. Parents of young children, especially, perceive this film as a horror movie. This double



“Little Harbour” © Hulapa Film



“Little Harbour” © Hulapa Film

storytelling, this game with the viewer, was very important to me and I hope it’s a stimulus for thought.

IT IS PRIMARILY A PSYCHOLOGICAL FILM AND YET THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IS PALPABLE; IT IS A MIX OF GENRES, WITH DOCUMENTARY AND MUSIC VIDEO INFLUENCES AS WELL AS HINTS OF ADVENTURE FILM. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT?

“Little Harbour” is somewhere on the border between fairytale and reality. The book itself has a very specific, poetic atmosphere that we wanted to bring to the big screen. I wanted a colourful visual, attractive to children. At the same time, I needed children’s heroes with authentic expression. The role required a child capable of adding deeper psychology to their acting. I needed to create the most authentic impression so, when directing, I also used methods common to documentary film. I wanted to do everything to make the story strong and realistic for both children and adults.

IN THAT SENSE, THERE IS A CLEAR-CUT SEPARATION BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL, ADULTS AND CHILDREN, THE OLD AND THE NEW, THUS BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN AUDIENCE MEMBER AGES. CHILDREN TAKING CARE OF BABIES CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AN ADVENTURE FILM BY YOUNG AUDIENCE MEMBERS WHILE OLDER VIEWERS WILL SEE IT AS A COMING OF AGE AND SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA. BUT IT ALSO BUILDS A BRIDGE OF EMPATHY BETWEEN JARKA AND THE OLDER SPECTATORS AND YOU REFRAIN FROM MAKING IT A MORAL TALE. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSUMPTION?

Yes, I see it the same way. Each of us is sensitive to other topics, often related to what we are currently experiencing, what our age is. For that, the film needs to contain several internal themes. Unfortunately, com-

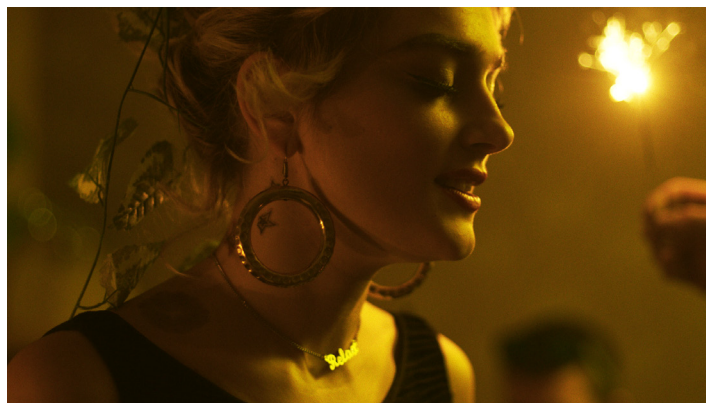
pared to literature, we have limited time to talk about them; we have to choose a main and more universal theme. I gave the most space to the emotional plane of the story and the experience of the main character. Other topics are only in soft contours. Empathy with the main character was the most important, to make the film communicate with different age categories. After all, each of us was a child once.

STILL IN THIS DIRECTION, YOU BRING OUT JARKA’S LONGING FOR PARENTAL LOVE WHILE LEARNING TO SURVIVE AND OVERCOME HER OWN WORLD OF LONELINESS. HOW DO YOU SEE HER?

She is quite used to spending her time alone and is very capable of taking care of herself – she can easily make pasta and wash her own clothes. She is used to dealing with difficult family situations and has learnt never to “make a fuss”. She doesn’t cry, scream or complain. She was already close to me in the book. It is a child who takes on the role of an adult. It’s hard for her to be carefree. Her character determines the development of the story, when she takes on the role of mother to two babies. Her friend Kristian helps the development of her character. He shows her how to be a child and Jarka shows him how he can grow up.

THE FILM’S FOCUS IS ON ONE’S GROWTH THROUGH CARING AND BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR ANOTHER BEING. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT?

Yes, it’s like that. Like the friendship between Jarka and Kristian, it’s an opportunity for them to grow. Jarka’s mother also gets a symbolic opportunity to grow up and start again, especially in the scene at the end of the film. Jarka gives her mother one of the babies, hoping that this time the mother would take on her role better.



“Little Harbour” © Hulapa Film

“LITTLE HARBOUR” IS A SLOVAK, CZECH AND HUNGARIAN CO-PRODUCTION. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SHOOTING PROCESS?

I was lucky that my feature debut got a good response from critics and film festivals. I was able to learn from it and produce a new film, “Little Harbour”, through my own company, Hulapa Film, together with Czech co-producer Jiří Konečný from Endorfilm and Hungarian Katapult Film. “Little Harbour” was very risky in terms of production and directing. The whole film is based on child actors and babies, often in combination with animals. We started shooting with incomplete financing and I was afraid that if I postponed shooting, the chosen actress for the main character of Jarka would grow up too much. If I had made the film through another more experienced production company, they would probably have had a hard time with the risks of this project. I tried to trust my own intuition and I took the risk.

AND ABOUT THE FILM’S AESTHETIC?

I wanted the film to be an intense visual experience. I hope it worked that way. This is thanks to collaboration with the talented young cinematographer Denisa Buranová. We both find the visual aspect of the film very important. Therefore, Denisa and I also worked as art directors of the project. We really put a lot of effort into it, from selecting the locations to the tiniest details in the setting as well as props.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF DISCUSSION ABOUT THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN FILM IN THE PAST TWO AND A HALF YEARS. WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON IT? HOW IS IT IN SLOVAKIA?

Slovak film is very small. Thanks to the Slovak Audiovisual Fund, the situation has improved in recent years, but it’s still about luck and hard work to get the opportunity to make a feature film. In this respect, women have also succeeded. It seems that they tolerate more difficult conditions better than men. Of course, women are still a minority in the Slovak film industry, but the situation is gradually improving. For example, for “Little Harbour”, the crew was equally balanced between men and women.

ARE YOU A FEMINIST? IF SO, HOW DOES IT INFORM YOUR FILMMAKING?

Yes, I’m a feminist. Unusually many women work on my projects, but it’s a completely natural and non-political decision for me.

AND, HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERISE YOUR FILM-MAKING STYLE?

I like challenges and I prefer demanding film projects. I like to flexibly change the film form and my style according to the needs of a particular film. My film style is rather characterised by choice of topics, mostly consisting of psychological and social dramas. I can’t put myself in a melancholic state and I give emphasis to narration in the shots/pictures in the form of artistic details. I try to convey the authentic feel of the film.

“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.”