

INTERVIEW WITH JASMILA ŽBANIĆ



Jasmila Žbanić © Deblokada by Imrana Kapetanovic

**DIRECTOR OF “QUO VADIS, AIDA”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**
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BY SARAH HURTES
WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DIRECT “QUO VADIS, AIDA”?

It is a tragedy that took my heart and soul. During the war in Bosnia (1992-1995), I was living in Sarajevo under the siege. It was 2.5 hours from Srebrenica. There was no electricity, the internet did not exist and information about Srebrenica and what was happening there was not coming regularly. Srebrenica was a United Nations (UN) protected zone and we Bosnians all hoped it was at least safe. We trusted the UN. But, after 30 000 people were expelled from their houses and the UN did nothing, then we all got scared – a sense of security completely disappeared. For me, the story of Srebrenica is an incredible drama of human beings that this institution failed to protect. The more I dug into it, the more I was shocked that it was possible that it could happen in modern-day Europe.

IS YOUR FILM ALSO SEEKING TO SHOW THAT THE UN CAN AND DOES FAIL AS AN INSTITUTION?

Our institutions, like the UN, are very fragile. We can see how new world leaders are trying to dismantle them. My film is not against the UN. It shows what happened when corruption gets a foothold in institutions like the UN. I want to see the UN continue to exist but based on a premise of human rights not political interests.

Now, when I say this, I have to say that politicians

are not the protagonists in my film. It's the human beings who felt the consequences of “political-deals”. I have decided to take the perspective of one character, Aida, a woman from Srebrenica who is a school teacher, and her family. I want to tell a human story because that is where the tragedy is.

WHY IS THE FILM'S PROTAGONIST A SCHOOL TEACHER?

Before the war Aida was a teacher and during the war she had to find a way to survive so she was working as a translator for the UN. She is Bosnian, so she can identify with the problems of life in a besieged city where she and her family live, but she is also working for the UN and has to respect the rules of her job. That creates a conflict in her, a conflict with Bosnians and a conflict within the UN.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE THE ACTRESS JASNA ĐURIČIĆ FOR THE ROLE?

For the part of the main character, Aida, we didn't even do casting. For me and the producer, Damir Ibrahimović, it was clear only one actress was right for the role of Aida. I didn't write the script with her in mind, but as soon as I finished the last version of the script and started talking about actors, we knew that it was Jasna. We had already worked together

er in the past, for my film “For Those Who Can Tell No Tales”. I watched her amazing performances in other films and the theatre. We were so happy she agreed, because the role is very hard emotionally and we also worked in very difficult conditions. Jasna is a marvellous performer and human being.

YOU WRITE THAT “QUO VADIS, AIDA” USES A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Many films that I see which deal with war, even anti-war films, take pleasure from the spectacle of war. As a woman I can't find anything enjoyable about war. It is a banal platform for sociopaths and people blinded by power. All human values are neglected and only the strong can survive. As a feminist



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I despise these structures. I find war full of banality and evil. So, the selection of my characters, my approach to visuals, camera, editing, every aspect of filmmaking is done from the feminist perspective.

AND YET YOU HAVE MADE MANY FILMS ABOUT WAR. WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO BRING TO YOUR AUDIENCE WITH THIS FILM THAT YOU HAVEN'T TACKLED BEFORE?

I have done films that talk about the consequences of war but this is my first war movie where we see war – tanks and weapons – in front of the camera. I had to deal with completely new actions and had to find a way to capture the emotions.

DID THE PANDEMIC AFFECT THE SHOOTING OF YOUR FILM?

We are still blocked (as non-EU citizens we are not allowed to enter many European countries), so our

post-production is on hold. Our film editor Jaroslaw Kamiński is in Poland, I am in Bosnia, Christine A. Mayer, the director of photography, is in Berlin. We were all supposed to be in Romania in March, where Avantpost, our film laboratory, is. The visual effects team is from Amsterdam, sound design from Bosnia and we hope to get together soon and finish the film. Lockdown time made me really impatient. I joke with my colleagues that I feel as though I've been pregnant for twelve months!

IN 1997, WITH FRIENDS, YOU FOUNDED THE ARTIST'S ASSOCIATION DEBLOKADA THROUGH WHICH YOU PRODUCE, WRITE AND DIRECT MANY FEATURES, DOCUMENTARIES AND VIDEO WORKS. WHY DID YOU FEEL THE NEED TO CREATE YOUR OWN PRODUCTION COMPANY?

It was a unique situation when we started production. It was just after the end of the war. I was still a student. Before the war, we had a socialist way of making movies: we had a wealthy film fund controlled by the government. Bosnia was part of Yugoslavia and it had a significant film industry with excellent film directors. Suddenly, we were left in divided countries. Bosnian film directors would go to Zagreb to the lab and all the equipment was in Belgrade or the other way around. Suddenly

we were left with no cameras, no laboratories and no funding. Young Bosnian directors at the end of the 1990s realised that they had to invent a new system. With my friends I established an association of artists. We named it Deblokada because, during the war, it was a term used daily. When Sarajevo was under siege, we would say “when will Deblokada be”, which meant when will the siege end. When it was all over, I still felt we needed to use this word because there are still so many blockages – the way we think, what we show or don't show – and we tried to de-block some stuff. We still try to find new ways to produce, like this film, which is a co-production involving many European countries. Though sometimes it is very hard to have so many co-producers on board, it is also a great feeling to work together at the European level.

YOU ALSO WORKED FOR A TIME IN THE UNITED STATES AS A PUPPETEER IN THE VERMONT-BASED BREAD AND PUPPET THEATER AND AS A CLOWN IN A LEE DELONG WORKSHOP. HAS THAT INFLUENCED YOUR WORK AS A FILM DIRECTOR?

Indeed. The Bread and Puppet Theater is run by Peter Schumann, a German who moved to New York a long time ago and then to Vermont, where he established his creative venture. It is a very political and artistic theatre. I am still in touch with them. Though Peter treats his puppets with the biggest respect, I do not take my actors for puppets. But the Bread and Puppet Theatre definitely inspired my creativity and sharpened my political perspective. I can say the same for Lee DeLong. By learning how to be a clown (*commedia dell'arte*), I have learned a lot about the art of performance, dramaturgy and how not to take yourself too seriously.

WHAT LED YOU TO WANT TO MAKE FILMS IN THE FIRST PLACE?

When I was a child, my favourite activities involved organising a bunch of kids in a show. I was forcing them to do rehearsals, then we would set a date, make posters, sell tickets and invite family and neighbours to come. We would make it a big event and we would perform. This game was the one that gave me the most pleasure. When my uncle bought a video camera, I was nine years old and he would allow us to use it from time to time. I would be the one organising the kids, allocating roles, convincing my brother, who wanted to play basketball, that film is more fun. There were murder stories and other different kinds of performances. At that time, I did not know what the word director even meant. My parents were economists, they had no connections to the world of film-making or performing, but luckily, because we lived in a socialist country, culture was available and accessible to all. When I was 11, I told my parents I would become a director. They thought: it will pass. I thought I would go to Prague and study film there because that's what good film directors in the former Yugoslavia did. But then war broke out and I stayed in Sarajevo and enrolled in the Academy for Performing Arts. Studying was crazy – no electricity, no food, no heat, no film material – but we were all imagining films. That is the first and most important step – to imagine.



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“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.”