

INTERVIEW WITH JUANITA WILSON

DIRECTOR OF “AS IF I AM NOT THERE”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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BY SARAH HURTES

WHAT LED YOU TO MAKE THE 2010 FEATURE FILM “AS IF I AM NOT THERE”?

Originally, when I read about the Bosnian war in the news and heard the reports coming out of the camps about the mass rape of women, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that there was such a thing as a „rape camp“ and no one seemed to be able to stop it. I remember at the time being horrified and not knowing how anyone could cope with that situation. What can you do to get through it? For a woman, that's definitely your worst nightmare. Over and over and over, night after night. It had a profound impact on me. I've always wanted to explore our vulnerability, our humanness at the times when our backs are to the wall and where we are truly tested. Previous films I worked on also dealt with this idea of imprisonment, politically and physically, and the struggle to have your voice heard, to claim your sovereignty and independence. For a woman in a rape camp, if you are stripped of your identity, your safety, your dignity and choice, how do you cope? How do you keep yourself intact? How do you hold on to your humanity?

THE FILM IS BASED ON A BOOK BY SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ. HAD YOU KNOWN THE BOOK FOR A WHILE?

I came across the book in a bookshop in Dublin in 1998 and read it in one sitting. It so powerfully describes

that harrowing experience of war and rape in a way that I had never fully understood before, especially the numbness that fear produces. Apparently, in cases of violence, after an initial adrenaline rush, there's a kind of almost sleepiness that comes over you. The sense of shock and disassociation are described so well in the book. And the way it explores the idea of freedom through the pregnancy and what that baby represents. What does it mean if you are physically free but you have no family to go back to, you have no home to go back to, no life to go back to? It's such a devastating twist. And then for the lead character, Samira, to discover the enemy has invaded her body and is growing inside of her. But this enemy inside her is also the last member of her family – what do you feel then? It's a very complex and emotional situation which Slavenka describes so well. The story is beautifully framed by this central dilemma so that, even though you go through the horrors of watching everything Samira experiences, the ending leaves you with something positive, some element of hope.

IS PORTRAYING HOPE IMPORTANT FOR YOU?

Hope is the only thing that can keep us going in times of darkness and adversity but it's not easy or neat. Often it becomes more and more of a conscious choice, an act that requires commitment. In this film, it portrays the idea of love overcoming hate. Ultimately it



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isn't simply a maternal instinct, but something much more profound and complex that allows Samira to perform that last act of picking up the child. It's about not denying what happened to her. I find that so powerful and moving. Slavenka does such a great job of weaving all the complexities and perspectives from the personal testimonies of the women coming out of the camps in Zagreb into a single narrative in the book. And the narrative is always very spare, very visual, very simple. And I really love that. But I have to say, when I was adapting her book, the challenges of writing something for the screen are very different from the page and there's a certain level of complexity that can be lost, unfortunately. I think her book really should be read by everyone. It's so beautiful and so full of insight.

ONE OF THE SCENES THAT MOVED ME THE MOST IS WHEN SHE SEES HERSELF BEING PHYSICALLY ABUSED – AS AN OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE. WAS THAT SOMETHING YOU CREATED FOR THE MOVIE OR IS IT LIKE THAT IN THE BOOK?

This moment is taken from the book but it seems to be a common trait of shock. As a director, you need to show the horror, but you don't want to be voyeuristic. And in the book, Samira says that the moment that she wishes she was dead is when the soldiers urinate on her. That act destroys her completely. This is a powerful way of portraying that out of body experience, of leaving your body and looking at what is happening to you from a distance. It is at once surreal and confusing. It's like it's happening and it's not happening. Everything becomes hyper-real, but also not real at all. That kind of

duality is common in trauma situations.

IN ONE SCENE, ALL THE MEN ARE BEING KILLED IN THE VILLAGE AND YET ALL THE WOMEN GATHERED IN ONE ROOM SHED NO TEARS, REMAINING SILENT. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO DEPICT THIS SCENE IN SUCH A WAY?

I was trying to be truthful about how Slavenka describes this moment in the book where fear induces a kind of numbness. Samira is surprised that the men are leaving quietly and not resisting and that no one says anything. "Why is no one doing anything?" she asks herself. It goes back to the reality of that numbness or denial that pervades in that situation. You think your instinct would be to run or scream or fight or do something dramatic, but it's almost like your system just shuts down and you keep on hoping until the end. It appears that the only thing you want to do in that situation is not attract attention. I tried to portray that reality, but I know dramatically it seems strange.

HOW DID YOU FIND THE LEAD ACTRESS NATAŠA PETROVIĆ FOR THE LEADING ROLE?

Finding the actress for the role of Samira was so important as the whole film hinges on her performance. The character in the book is a little older, but I liked the idea of her being young and leaving home for the first time and just about to start her independent life. So we auditioned and workshopped young actors extensively in Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade, and we eventually found Natasa in Skopje in Macedonia. She was studying in the drama school there and she originally came in to read for a smaller role. But as soon as we put the camera on her, she completely held our interest.



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She read a few scenes from different parts of the script and just grew in front of our eyes. It was incredible to see. She has such a sensitivity and vulnerability and can express so much with her eyes, which is essential because her character can't speak much in the camp, she doesn't have a lot of dialogue. All her emotions have to be portrayed visually. So we found her after a long search very late into the process. And it was fantastic when we did. I think she's extraordinary.

LOOKING BACK, WHAT IS YOUR FONDEST MEMORY FROM THE SHOOTING?

My first visit to Sarajevo was really powerful. Seeing the bullet holes in the buildings for the first time and the vastness of the cemeteries was very moving. Sarajevo is such a historic city that has always had such a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The feeling being there was profound – knowing the devastation that the war had caused, but also witnessing the vibrancy and spirit of the people living there. I travelled across the former Yugoslavia with Timka Grahic, the casting director, on our casting road trips, and got to see so much of the incredible landscape and hear so many stories. I remember hiking up into the mountains outside of Sarajevo in three feet of snow looking for an abandoned factory, driving through Macedonia and seeing nothing but mountain peaks on the horizon, the crumbled stone villages contrasting with the vibrancy of café life on the streets of Skopje. The castings were always very special and very charged, especially the first one in Sarajevo. It was amazing seeing the script come to life for the first time, finding the actors and locations one by one until finally finding Natasa just when we were almost out of time. And, of

course, meeting Slavenka for the first time and screening the film at the Sarajevo Film Festival. Those moments will always stay with me. The contrast between the horror of what you're trying to portray and the joy of collaborating with many different people and discovering talent – that stays with you.

HOW DID YOU HANDLE THE LANGUAGE? BECAUSE MOST OF THE FILM IS NOT SPOKEN IN ENGLISH.

To be honest, a lot of it is body language. You can sense if something feels right. And since I had read the book in English and wrote the script in English, I knew what the actors should be saying. And of course we had people on set to monitor the language and make sure that what was being said matched the script. Where it was problematic was dealing with larger numbers of people with the extras and crowds. It meant there was another layer to go through in terms of translation rather than being able to speak directly to everyone. That slowed the filming process down a little at times. But regarding not speaking a language, there's an element of being forced to boil everything down to its essence. You have to be very clear, direct and simple, which can be a really good thing.

DID YOU EXPECT THE FILM TO BE SO WELL RECEIVED?

It's been a real privilege to watch the film with different audiences around the world and to find that it touches so many people. It's a very powerful feeling. It's also complex because, on the one hand, you're presenting a film to an audience but, on the other, you're representing an experience that happened in real life. The reality of that experience always overshadows everything. There's been moments and responses that will stay with me forever. At the screening at the Toronto



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International Film Festival, the cinema was completely full. And there was a couple from Bosnia and Herzegovina who had moved over just when the war broke out. They had tried to avoid anything to do with the aftermath of the war up to this point. But they decided to come to see the film and they spoke to me afterwards. Talking to them was extremely moving. It's such a big responsibility to try to portray a real life experience sensitively and truthfully and in a way that other people can get some insight into it and be moved.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

I'm working on an adaptation of a memoir by the American writer Artis Henderson. She writes so movingly of falling in love with her husband, Miles, a trainee pilot who eventually gets sent to Iraq where, unfortunately, he is killed in a helicopter crash at the age of 24. She describes her total devastation at his loss and the challenge of being the one left behind to rebuild her whole life. That aspect is similar to Samira at the end of "As If I Am Not There". It's almost as if, in that one helicopter crash, her life has also been exploded and she has to pick up all the pieces and try and put them back together again, to make some kind of sense of it all, to answer the existential questions. Why? Why Miles? And what's the point of everything? What are the things that give our lives meaning? I've been doing a lot of reading and research into many aspects of what the Iraq war involved and trying to find ways to portray some of the experiences of that war, but in ways that haven't been fully explored before. Often, women's stories are told in the background of the more so-called heroic stories of war. I'm curious about the people whose lives are shattered by war and who are still living with the trauma every day of their lives. Things like picking themselves up, getting out of bed in the morning and facing life with such courage that they can survive and function, and find a reason to keep going. It's so incredibly powerful and inspiring to try and tell those stories. I think they're the real heroes.

"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."