

Interview with Karin Junger



By Tara Karajica
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Dutch filmmaker Karin Junger grew up in French-speaking Belgium and attended secondary school in Brussels. She studied French Language and Literature and Mass Communication at the University of Amsterdam, specializing in film science. She followed training in "Directing Drama" at the Maurits Binger Film Institute in Amsterdam and participated in several workshops such as the "Sources" Script Workshop, the "Directing Actors" workshop led by Ruud Schuitemaker and the "Camera" workshop taught by Leonard Retel Helmrich. Junger's cinematic work focuses on both fiction and documentaries, her first documentary having won the prestigious Joris Ivens Award. Her fiction films have also won awards: a Silver Bear at the 2004 Berlinale (for Best Short Film – "Great!") and the Golden Calf (for Best Music for "Bolletjes Blues") at the Dutch Film Festival in 2006. Her films often deal with human and social issues and have a strong sense of urgency, as well as a strong social commitment in terms of inventiveness and style.

Tara Karajica talks to Karin Junger about her newest project, "10 Songs for Charity" and the situation of women in today's film industry.

How did "10 Songs for Charity" come about?

Karin Junger: In the neighbourhood where I live in Amsterdam I come across women from Africa and Latin America who live in the Netherlands "illegally" and make ends meet by working as cleaners, caretakers or prostitutes. Having grown up in Africa or Latin America, the "struggle for life" has driven them out of their own countries and they now continue this struggle in Europe's ghettos. Having come to the Netherlands to escape poverty, in search of a better life, they are exploited, humiliated and hunted by pimps, customers and police. Still, they appear anything but beaten down: streetwise and shrewd, bold and brazen, used to taking punches. Whatever happens, they keep on smiling. A smile that is tough, radiant and defiant. A smile that says: "I will not be beaten" and "I will always enjoy life as much as I can, in spite of everything". I admire their vitality, their resilience and inventiveness. They are my inspiration for this film. I want to make films that reflect on today's social issues. Issues like human trafficking, migration and illegality. This is where the drama takes place, where one finds stories about the *condition humaine* that possess urgency and importance. Dutch cinema rarely singles out illegal black female immigrants as main characters. I find it a challenge to do just that.

In your director's statement you talk about the urgency of "10 Songs for Charity", not only in its depiction of social issues, but also in its filmic nature. Can you elaborate on that?

K.J.: My fascination with these women is also artistic and cinematic. I enjoy observing these women. Their resilience inspires me. I think they are strong and interesting characters for a feature. I like to watch them. I also want to capture their beauty, their dynamic energy and musicality in this film.

"10 Songs for Charity" is a musical about a tough contemporary subject; a modern musical fairytale about human trafficking. Can you talk more about its concept?

K.J.: I'm aware of the fact that it may seem strange to combine a story on a tough subject with the musical style. One reason is that I want to focus on resilience instead of tragedy and suffering. I don't want to victimise the women even though their life is tough. Another reason is that I believe cinema has to renew and challenge itself by exploring unorthodox ways of telling stories. I guess it would probably be obvious to tell the story of Charity in a plain social realistic movie. That in itself is a reason not to do it. Both on the level of content (making the characters more than just

victims of trafficking) and that of form (adding the magic of musical to the story), it seems more interesting to me to explore new ways.

Can you deconstruct the title of your film and explain it?

K.J.: It's actually still a working title. The ten songs are telling the story of the main characters and, in a sense, of the many women from Africa, Latin America, etc. who come to Europe in search of a better life. Songs about dreaming, about selling yourself, about being homesick, hoping for love and a "legal" life. As the story progresses, the songs reflect on the conditions in which the women live and, in the end, the songs become protest songs. In the title, it says "for" Charity because, in a way, this film is an ode to these women.

You say that film is by definition a constructed reality, but the musical genre goes further. Where will "10 Songs for Charity" lead film according to your definition of it?

K.J.: My intention is to make a new, unusual sort of musical. As the co-producer Tomas Leijers said: "Dardennes meets Baz Luhrmann." So I'm exploring the combination of two genres: social hyper-realism and musical. The tension between those two will be interesting and I hope the film will provide a fresh, inspiring experience. It is a challenge to develop a new kind of musical: rough, poignant and brimming with life, but one that needs to be poetic at the same time; it needs to swing as well as sting, and to dare to be ugly, distinguishing itself from the traditional Hollywood musical.

Can you tell us how you plan to achieve that? And why do you shy away from the polished look of U.S. musicals?

K.J.: For me, a polished and highly stylised American film musical like Chicago is too noncommittal and harmless. I prefer to look for inspiration in films like "Dancer in the Dark" by Lars von Trier, "Precious" by Lee Daniels, "Un Prophète" by Jacques Audiard, or "Les Bien-aimés" by Christophe Honoré. Films that provide a tilted perspective on reality, without making it impossible for the audience to identify with its characters and without losing credibility. "10 Songs for Charity" will distinguish itself from the traditional Hollywood musical by the harsh realism of its arena and the illegal prostitutes' lives; the roughness of style – in contrast to Hollywood musicals, the film will have an unpolished look and will be shot on location instead of in the studio; we will record the songs live on set; the development of the main characters as real, three-dimensional people whom the audience can identify with and the choice of music: black contemporary urban music (Afro Soul, R&B, hip-hop). This is not an arbitrary choice. It is music which belongs to the women and encompasses their history, its roots lying in Africa and the black diaspora. Music that expresses pain but also offers solace, joy and beauty.

In that sense, can you talk about the songs and the choreography?

K.J.: The songs are first and foremost an expression of their resilience and vitality. They also enable me to add another layer to the film. The life of an illegal immigrant is characterised by lies and secrets. Illegal means: not being allowed to be where you are and who you are. It means being forced to lie in the world in which you live, but often also in the world you have left behind. You cannot be yourself, or say aloud what you know, believe or think. I want to tell the story of this concealed layer of illegal life through song. The songs, which are expressions of resilience, break through the sheer realism and bring magic to the film. They depict the secret world of the women and illustrate the conflict between the real and the inner world. For example, one of the songs is about Charity's dream to become a businesswoman and own her own company selling expensive cars, or Felicia's dream to marry and lead a normal (=legal) life. But the songs also reveal thoughts that the women cannot or dare not speak out loud. For instance, at the Dutch customs, where they declare that they have come to Holland because of the demand for black whores, or in the scene where Charity sells herself as a "brown fucking machine".

The function of the songs gradually shifts in correspondence with the women's dramatic development. As they become more self-confident and start to rebel against their situation, they will express themselves more openly. The gap between the inner and the real world disappears, because they do not hide any more. This change first becomes apparent when Charity sings a song for Happy, after Happy has been beaten up. It is confirmed when Happy and Charity confront the policeman in the safe house. At the end of the film, in the last song, the "real" world and the inner world (or, if you like, the outer and the inner world) overlap and become one, because the women openly show themselves as who they are. The look of the film can change during the songs. The rough, sometimes grey reality is then interrupted by a more colourful, imaginative image.



Omotaniola Famodimu and Ijeoma Grace Agu, playing Happy and Charity

Some of the film's musical scenes will be choreographed. Some scenes will contain actual dance, for which choreography will be developed, rehearsed and performed; others will not consist of dance but rather of movement, which will be developed and rehearsed with a choreographer or body clapping instructor. I have used the past period to orientate myself towards the designated style of dance/movement and look for a suitable choreographer. To that purpose, I took part in the workshop "Choreography and movement direction in film" in January, led by the choreographer Francesca Jaynes, who has worked with Tim Burton and Steven Spielberg among many other directors, at the University of West London and organised by the Fest Film LAB.

The style I am looking for combines modern dance, African dance and hip-hop – a style as developed by choreographer Germaine Acogny of the renowned École des Sables. My basic premise is that to fit in with the concept of the film, the dance cannot be too fluid or polished. It has to come across as a spontaneous, non-choreographed expression of emotion and cannot be too narrative or explanatory. The dancers too have to fit in with the cast: multicoloured and multi-shaped, instead of having the stereotypical slender and athletic professional dancers' bodies. For the end scene, which represents a kind of spontaneous revolt, I want men and women who are fat, or short, etc. in a mix of professional and non-professional dancers.

What about the film's aesthetic and visual style?

K.J.: The camera style will originate in the film's content, which is both harsh and realistic as well as poetic, dreamy and full of longing. Our inspiration will come from films like "Un Prophète" by Jacques Audiard. In this film, the camera style is closely dependent on what the main character is going through – sometimes realistic, observant, close to the skin, at other moments stylised and distant – or when the main character longs to escape the narrow confines of her prison cell, poetic and dreamy. The documentary "look" will also be reflected in the choice of locations and actors. The arena for this film is a bleak suburb of a Western European city, big enough to harbour a subculture of illegality with its accompanying anonymity and lawlessness. The decor is gloomy and grey, but the bright, saturated colours of the women's clothes, and their shining eyes, lips, hair and jewellery will make the film vibrant and colourful. The lighting will be designed to provide the actresses with a maximum of freedom. The camera will adapt to their movements, instead of the other way around, enabling a way of acting that is both fresh and natural.

For you, it is important for the film to have a strong sense of authenticity. Why? How do you plan to achieve that?

K.J.: The film needs a strong sense of authenticity in order to be convincing. It has to be convincing in every aspect: in the choice of locations, the production design, the casting, the acting, the execution of detail and the dialogue. To add that "slice of life" feeling, I will ask the actresses to live together on location for six weeks. I will make use of the interactions and events that spring from their daily life at the flat. When choosing actors, I will look for a natural roughness and expression. They will sooner be unusual than conventional beauties.

Can you talk about the casting? How hard was it to find your actresses?

K.J.: Finding the two actresses/singers for the main roles was one of the most challenging tasks of this phase. These were our main principles: authenticity and the combination of singing and acting talent. In terms of authenticity, there should not be any doubts about the Nigerian roots of the actresses, they have to be completely believable as two women from the slums of Lagos discovering Europe. It is important that they speak Pidgin English, and that they have sufficient rawness.

As far as the combination of singing and acting talent is concerned, both must be present in equal measure.

Because we decided immediately that we wanted to work with real Nigerian women, we chose to organise the casting itself with contacts in the African community in the Netherlands and Belgium. It has become a singular quest. We left

leaflets in malls, in schools, on the streets, in churches and community centres. We made calls using social media and local African radio stations. We visited shelters for real victims of trafficking and there we also found women who wanted to participate in the film. This resulted in auditions with about thirty girls and young women. We found a lot of girls and women who were suitable for supporting roles and as extras and a few good candidates for the role of Happy. But we could not find our Charity. Charity carries the film. She must have a great look, a strong physical presence, raw and refined, brutal and loving. And a top performer as she sings and dances. Therefore, we decided to look further afield in Nigeria. I have been often to Nigeria – for the documentary “Sexy Money” – and have since been in touch with members of the Nigerian film industry. I set up the casting in Nigeria. For Happy, we searched in schools, church choirs, theatre companies. For Charity, we also searched on the Nigerian music scene and among professional actresses. This produced two fantastic candidates for the role of Happy and Charity.

Women are at the core of your film. Can you talk about your portrayal of them here, in your opus and in film in general?

K.J.: I feel concerned about specific female issues and women’s problems. But I like to focus on the resilience of women and not portray them as mere victims. I think it’s important that the women I portray have a sense of humour and are smart and inventive. I want them to be interesting and inspiring characters.

What is your opinion on the situation of women in today’s film industry?

K.J.: I think that, in general, women still have to fight harder in order to make films or get work and respect in, for instance, the position of cinematographer. But I must say, in the Netherlands, where I live, more and more key positions such as commissioning editor, head of film funds, festival directors, etc. are in the hands of women. So I personally don’t feel disadvantaged by my gender.

Do you think that this film can only be made by a female director?

K.J.: No, I don’t think so. I don’t believe a director has to be a member of a certain group of people or have a certain colour or gender etc. in order to make a film concerning them. The beautiful film “Moonlight” about the journey of a homosexual in the U.S. was made by a heterosexual man. There are wonderful films made about women by men. I believe we are all humans and capable of understanding and empathy for all kinds of humans. Yet, this is only possible if we stay humble; if we take time to listen, to study, in order to really understand.

How do you think it will help these women, if at all?

K.J.: Unfortunately, I don’t think the film will offer much help for the women the story is about. It would be pretentious to assume that. Women trafficking has to do with poverty, with the bad position of women, with unfair macro-economic issues... A film can’t solve all this. I hope it raises awareness about their fate and living conditions.