

## INTERVIEW WITH KATRIN GEBBE



**DIRECTOR OF “PELICAN BLOOD”,  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED  
BY EURIMAGES**

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**BY MARIAN EVANS**

**YOUR FIRST FEATURE, “NOTHING BAD CAN HAPPEN” (NBCH, 2013), DEALT WITH THEMES THAT YOU’VE DESCRIBED AS “THE ORIGINS OF GOOD, EVIL, AND FREE WILL” AND WAS SELECTED FOR UN CERTAIN REGARD AT CANNES. “PELICAN BLOOD” HAS SIMILAR THEMES?**

I love to explore human behaviour in extreme conditions – the exciting relationships and the complexity of a given situation. In “Pelican Blood” our protagonist is confronted with a dilemma: she recently adopted a second child, Raya, who is emotionally disturbed and harms the people around her, especially her new sister. What can be done if the person you love destroys your life? How should we treat the offenders and misfits of our society who behave in a “wrong” way? What price do we pay, if we hold on to our hope?

**YOU’VE SAID THAT YOU ARE INTERESTED IN “THE DARK SIDE”. WHY?**

Some observations and encounters made me curious when I was a youngster. I had a great childhood. Everything was so beautiful and fair. When I grew older, I discovered what was behind the facade. I was not interested in the shadows of Plato’s cave, I wanted to go out and see the real stuff.

It is kind of magical to understand a new perspective. And I like to be confronted with uncomfortable questions. It doesn’t frighten me, it is exciting. I remember lying in my bed as a child, trying to fall asleep. I was picturing the universe that I’d learned was infinite. But what comes behind the last bit of infinity? That drove me crazy. Sometimes we have to accept that there is no answer to comfort us.

## WHOSE LIVES AND WORKS INSPIRE YOU?

I appreciate film-makers who are constantly reinventing themselves, who are controversial, really trying to get to the bottom of something and explore something new. It would be a shame to just name a few. But I also get my inspiration from literature and the art world. The philosopher René Girard, the writer Dostoevsky and the photographer Nan Goldin, for example, had a great influence on “NBCH”.

For “Pelican Blood” the artist Berlinde De Bruyckere was very influential. I love the twisted emotions that surface when I eye her sculptures. I think her work has a lot to do with the characters in the film, especially Wiebke, Raya and the horse Top Gun.

## HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE SCRIPT?

I started with researching true cases. I was very excited by young perpetrators, psychopaths. Are you born with something that makes you become like that? Could this be changed by the people around you? When I was working on the first draft, a bigger theme started to eat itself through the material. What touched me more and more was the absolute devotion of the adoptive mother who is confronted with her new “broken” daughter, how she deals with the pain, disappointment and boundaries she is confronted with.

I showed the first draft to the same people who had read “NBCH” – a handful of friends I trust and whose taste I appreciate (film-makers and non-film-makers). Later on, the producer Verena Gräfe-Höft and I joined the Torino Film Lab, a great and very fruitful experience. We had a wonderful script adviser – Marietta von Hausswolff von Baumgarten – and working with the other film-makers and film professionals was helpful during the process.

## A SECOND FEATURE AFTER A SUCCESSFUL FIRST ONE IS NOTORIOUSLY CHALLENGING. WHAT WERE THE PLEASURES AND THE CHALLENGES?

The budget for “NBCH” was very small compared to “Pelican Blood”, because back then we still had to prove that we could actually pull it off. Entering Cannes 2013 with “NBCH”, as the only German film that year, was of course a great opportunity for us. Its festival success meant we were taken seriously from then on and I am sure it helped a lot to finance this project. Having Nina Hoss starring also added a lot of creative value to the film and made the project very attractive.



*Verena Gräfe-Höft (Producer), Nina Hoss (Wiebke), Katerina Lipovska (Raya), Adelia Ocleppo (Nicolina), Katrin Gebbe (Director), Dimitar Banenkin (Hagen), Moritz Schultheiß (DOP), Mila Voinikova (Co-Producer)*

Although “Pelican Blood” had a real budget, it was still difficult to make it work, because the script has children as main characters, horses, SFX and because of the time span of the story we needed to cover. We had to set priorities. The number of shooting days was always the biggest priority, since we had so many scenes with kids. To portray Germany in Bulgaria was also quite demanding, especially to find an equestrian location that fitted the needs of our story. We were so lucky that we had Silke Fischer and Anna Boyanova as our art directors on board. They really built the entire place.

When we started to finance the project we heard a lot of people saying: "Cool story, but how will you possibly find a girl this age doing that?" We were so lucky to find little Katerina Lopovska (our Raya) in Bulgaria! I was so surprised by Kati's skills. She was just 6 years old and had so much temper and energy. She could be so cute and in the next second show us a face like the devil himself is staring at you. It was awesome to

in every scene. I needed to learn about how best to approach them, what their strengths were, how long they could concentrate and what workflow worked best for the process of shooting, as well as how to best communicate during the actual shoot. Their German was basic so in the end I decided to work with Simona and a translator always at my side, so they could give my instructions directly to the kids. Also we worked with a children's double for Raya.



*Nina Hoss (Wiebke) in Pelican Blood*

see how she understood everything. And she never got sick during a 40-day shoot! I was really afraid of her getting exhausted, because Nina Hoss had another project to go on to.

To work with Nina Hoss was an amazing experience. She is a wonderful actress and gives every moment so much depth. As a person she is warm, fun, understanding and on the same wavelength as the rest of the team. It was truly a pleasure to work with her!

I especially thank our children's coach Simona, Kati's mother. She started to work with the main child actors some months before the shoot and for the last month they lived in a camp on the beach to train in depth, a German teacher at their side.

### **HOW DO YOU LIKE TO DIRECT ACTORS?**

Nina Hoss and I started to dig into the character and script some months before the shoot and we had a rehearsal week with all the main actors. That was great, to embody the characters and to get to know each other more.

The rehearsal week was particularly important for the child actors, especially because they are basically

I also spoke a lot to Simona beforehand about the children's psychology and how you could work on scenes that were not so suitable for children. In the end she invented fake content to make particular scenes look fun.

The horses were trained by special horse trainers. Our main horse, Top Gun, had doubles as well. And of course our actors had to take some riding lessons!

### **DO YOU THINK THAT THE MOVES TOWARDS GENDER EQUITY IN THE INDUSTRY HAVE GIVEN YOU GREATER OPPORTUNITIES?**

I don't know if the new focus on supporting more female directors and producers played a role in our financing. But when I compare myself and my female colleagues to male national and international directors who have a similarly successful first feature, women definitely have a harder time to win job proposals and financing. It is also more difficult to make a second feature at all and, if one does, it mostly takes longer, even though there is so much research that proves women are really smart with their budgets and their films win prizes more often. In Germany still only 4% of feature films are produced and directed by an all-female team, like Verena and I.

I am a member of the women's networks Pro Quote Film and Women in Film and Television. I think Pro Quote in particular helped a lot to improve our conditions in Germany in the past years. There is an awareness of discrimination against women that has emerged among those responsible in broadcasting, film promotion and politics. Nobody any longer denies discrimination against female creatives in the film and television industry. Especially in the television busi-

ness, producers and editors employ women more often now. The film industry has also woken up.

At the moment the new, hip, high-budget television series are mostly men's business. That doesn't surprise me, but it really sucks to see it happen. But I am positive that this has to and will change. It is crucial to create more diversity and present life and art from different points of view.

I love to work with men and with women. I appreciate talent and enthusiasm. On "Pelican Blood" it happened that we worked with a lot of female Heads of department, but that was not a particular strategy because we worked with those who we thought were the best people for the project. But when I looked at the completed cast list of "Pelican Blood" I was surprised to realise how many roles I unconsciously wrote for women actors.

Because we were so many months abroad, I and my partner, Moritz Schultheiß, who is also the Director of Photography of "Pelican Blood", had a nanny with us who took care of our 9-month-old baby. The production really supported this, financially and in other ways. Some years ago Moritz worked as a Director of Photography in Sweden. They had an 8-hour-only working day, which was great for all team members – they could still keep their family lives. I think there is a lot we can learn from countries like Sweden.



*Director of Photography Moritz Schultheiß  
and Director Katrin Gebbe*