

## INTERVIEW WITH LAURA SCHROEDER

**DIRECTOR OF "THE TREASURE KNIGHTS AND  
THE SECRET OF MELUSINA"**  
**A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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**BY TARA KARAJICA**

*Born in Luxembourg, Laura Schroeder graduated with a Masters in Film Studies at the University of Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne and a Postgraduate Diploma in Directing at the National Film and Television School, London. After her studies, she wrote and directed two short films, "Senteurs" (2008) and "Double Saut" (2011), both of which screened at many festivals worldwide, as well as the transdisciplinary theatre play "Luxtime – Jacques Tati revisited" (2009) which, after its success in Luxembourg, was also shown at the Avignon Theatre Festival in 2010. In 2012, she directed "The Treasure Knights" ["Schatzritter"], a family drama for children. After directing two episodes of the sitcom "Comeback" and a documentary for the series "routwaïssgro" for Luxembourgish television, Laura staged the contemporary German play "Das Ding aus dem Meer" by Rebekka Kricheldorf at the Théâtre de la Ville in Luxembourg in January 2016. In 2017, Laura's first personal feature, "Barrage", co-written with Marie Nimier and starring Isabelle Huppert and Lolita Chammah, had its world premiere in the Forum section of the Berlinale. After travelling to festivals worldwide and being released in many countries, the film was chosen to represent Luxembourg at the 2018 Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film.*

*Tara Karajica talks to Laura Schroeder about her first film, "Schatzritter", film in Luxembourg, family entertainment, women in today's film industry and her next project.*

### HOW DID "SCHATZRITTER" COME ABOUT?

Bernard Michaux, the main producer of the film, had developed the idea and written an initial draft. He then offered me the chance to direct it. I was at that time writing what would become my second feature film, "Barrage", and wasn't necessarily thinking about doing a commissioned film before that, but the topic matter and the idea of working with Bernard were quite thrilling, so I accepted the offer. Together, we chose the writers who were going to write the script.

### WHAT WAS THE HISTORICAL RESEARCH PROCESS ABOUT MELUSINE LIKE?

I remember spending numerous hours reading and making notes on the legend of Melusine, the one from Luxembourg, but also similar legendary characters in other cultures. This myth exists in slightly different forms all over the world. Their names and the exact story vary from one country to the other, but it's always about a woman transforming into a strange, scary



"The Treasure Knights and the Secret of Melusina" still by Ricardo Vaz Palma © Lucil film, neos film

figure – fish, dragon or similar – who vanishes when her husband breaks his oath to allow her privacy. It was very interesting to create the character of Melusine/Melanie from the elements of the legend and also the other characters, to decide what to keep and what to throw out.

### **THE FILM MIXES MANY GENRES AND REMINDS US OF ENID BLYTON'S STORIES. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?**

Having a group of friends reuniting for the summer and setting out on an incredible adventure was indeed a strong element of the story from the start – this adventure that every kid dreams of and thus wants to see and experience on screen. I devoured all of Enid Blyton's books as a child and so probably did Bernard. We're kids of the 1980s, so films like "Stand by Me" or "The Goonies" also had an influence on the story. Our aim was to create a film that was similar to the Harry Potter films – adventure and certain fantasy elements – but also with a very realistic, human side to it, like in "Stand by Me" – the conflict between father and son, the experience of growing up, the loss of the mother, but still with a light touch to it.

**IN THAT SENSE, THE FILM IS AN ADVENTURE AND COMING OF AGE STORY WHERE YOU DELVE INTO MANY THEMES SUCH AS GROWING UP, TEENAGE CRUSHES, FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP, ONE-PARENT FAMILIES. AND TO ADD TO THE LIST, THE QUOTE "A WOMAN WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHO SHE CAN TRUST" IS OMNIPRESENT IN THE FILM AND HAS MULTIPLE LAYERS, AND IN A WAY UNITES THESE THEMES. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT AND ON JEFF'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER? AND ALSO, ON HIS RE-**

### **LATIONSHIP WITH HIS MOTHER, WHICH IS PRESENT IN A SORT OF METAPHYSICAL WAY THROUGHOUT THIS ADVENTURE?**

The notion of trust is indeed key to the film. It was also my very personal door into the subject matter, the one important core I wanted the film to evolve around. Trust is the basic ground for any kind of relationship in my eyes, in a child's relationship with his or her parents and vice-versa, in a sexual relationship/partnership, among friends. This notion of trust is part of the coming-of-age that Jeff goes through, that even his dad goes through, and it is reflected in Melusine/Melanie. The coming-of-age factor in the story was very important to me. In the film, there are four kids at the centre. They all have their own issues so there's a broad field for young audiences to identify with. The legend of Melusine is, in my eyes, all about giving space to somebody. And it is about trust. This is what we wanted to reflect in Jeff's relationship with his dad. The father needs to give his son the necessary space for him to grow and evolve.

### **CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE CHARACTER OF MELUSINE/MELANIE? YOU HINT AT HER IDENTITY VERY WELL THROUGH HER COSTUMES. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSUMPTION?**

Melusine/Melanie had to be real and not real at the same time. She had to have simple, naturalistic elements to her character, but also fantastic ones. She had to be a woman who could make an impression on the kids, but also on the dad, and still not be a vamp or an obvious seducer. She needed to be a kind, attractive, sympathetic woman who might on the surface seem slightly naïve, but with a mysterious edge to her character and appearance. For everything regarding her character – and mostly, indeed, the costumes – we



"The Treasure Knights and the Secret of Melusina" still by Ricardo Vaz Palma © Lucil film, neos film





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had to keep that in mind. So her clothes are quite simple, loose trousers most of the time, nothing very fancy, tops that are close to the body, but not too revealing either. And if you think about the fantasy side, you could think that in those clothes her silhouette resembles the shape of a fish – the legs being the tail, which is the shape that Melusine takes in the Luxembourgish legend when she vanishes. It all had to be subtle and hint at her "double existence" without clearly revealing it.

**"SCHATZTRITTER" WAS YOUR DEBUT FILM. WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO WORK ON A CHILDREN'S FILM AS YOUR FIRST FEATURE? HOW DO YOU SEE THE CHILDREN'S FILM/FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT GENRE?**

Although I had directed children before in two short films, I certainly – before this offer came – hadn't thought that I was going to direct a film for children as a first feature. "Schatzritter" not only being a children's film, but also a genre film to a certain extent, it implied making adaptations in storytelling most of all, a very different storytelling to my previous and later, more personal, work. It was an experience that taught me a lot and maybe that's a strange thing to say, but it somehow widened the creative freedom I allowed myself for the films to come. I think that good, classy family entertainment is hugely important. We've all grown up with family entertainment films that have left a mark. They entertained us, made us laugh, cry and dream, and, even if the moral values might sometimes be too visible or constrained, they left an important mark on us children and I feel that they stay with us all our lives. I think that's wonderful.

**I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAST NON-PROFESSIONAL CHILDREN ACTORS FOR THE MAIN ROLES. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE CASTING AND SHOOTING PROCESSES OF THE FILM?**

The casting process was quite long. I don't remember the exact number, but I think we saw about 800 children for the four parts. We then selected a shortlist of 16 kids, I think, and I worked with them in four groups of four, later trying them in different combinations to see how they would match. Anton Glas, who plays Jeff, stood out quite soon. It was quite wonderful to work with them. The shoot was long, so we got to know each other and it was also very interesting to see how they were all so different in their approach, just as grown-up actors are very different one from another. One of them would always know their text word for word, whereas another one would be less well prepared, but would then make up for it through improvising.

**"SCHATZTRITTER" IS A LUXEMBOURG/GERMAN CO-PRODUCTION. WHAT WAS THIS EXPERIENCE LIKE? HOW HAS THE FILM BEEN RECEIVED AND POSITIONED IN LUXEMBOURG?**

It was the first time I shot abroad, edited abroad and basically did all the post-production abroad. I very much enjoyed it, especially to be able to choose your crew from a larger pot. I had a wonderful editor in Berlin, Uta Schmidt, and great sound people in Munich. We also spent a lot of time doing the synchronisation of the film to have one complete version in Luxembourgish and one in German. That was a long, completely new process for me. The film was incredibly well received in Luxembourg. It opened right at the beginning of the summer holidays and was often sold



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out in cinemas. It was the first Luxembourgish children's film of that kind and I still often get positive or nostalgic feedback today from kids or parents who saw it, often more than just once.

### **HOW DO YOU SEE LUXEMBOURG'S FILM INDUSTRY TODAY? HOW HAS IT EVOLVED IN THE PAST FEW YEARS?**

Luxembourg's film industry is much younger than that of its neighbouring countries. In the past few years, a few directors have emerged, like Govinda van Maele and myself, who have managed to export their films abroad – a phenomenon that is very new to Luxembourgish films. With "Barrage" three years ago, I was, to give an example, the first Luxembourgish director ever to have a film in the official selection of the Berlinale. Other directors like Felix Koch or Christophe Wagner have managed to produce films with unseen local success. So it's a young, thriving industry with still considerable scope to grow. In the next few years, it will be interesting to see how the industry and funds will find a balance between the many co-productions – that are also necessary to keep the local industry alive – and the films by local directors and, of course, where those films will go.

### **THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF DISCUSSION ABOUT THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE FILM INDUSTRY IN THE PAST TWO AND A HALF YEARS. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE MATTER? HOW IS THE SITUATION IN LUXEMBOURG?**

I participated in a panel in Karlovy Vary two years ago on the subject. We were four women directors and we had an hour to talk, and it felt like after that hour we had only finished introducing the subject matter. I was reluctant at first to participate in the panel – because do you ask male directors to participate in a panel on "male directors"? But then I thought that as long as people put these panels in place, there is a need for them. So to somehow sum up what I think: I think it is very good to put schemes in place to support women, to put them in the spotlight and to create measures to allow women – especially in certain countries – to have an "easier" access to financing or workshops, but I also think that, in the end, the films have to speak for themselves, whether they are directed by a woman or a man. The question is, of course: who wants to see which films? Is there something like a women's

film? And you would most certainly also have to carry out audience education to change the point of view on women's films, if there is such a thing. Why is it that men seem to be doing more mainstream films? Is that really so, or has the male audience determined what has become mainstream? Questions, questions, questions... I'm currently – I hope not to offend anybody – one of the only female directors to make feature films on a somewhat regular basis in Luxembourg and, to be honest, I feel that it's rather to my advantage than to my disadvantage.

### **WHAT DO YOU HAVE IN THE PIPELINE NOW?**

After "Barrage", that premiered in Berlin in 2017, I'm currently preparing my third feature, "Maret". I'm hoping to shoot it at beginning of 2021. It's my second personal feature after "Barrage". The original idea is mine, but I developed the script with a German co-writer, Judith Angerbauer. The film is half in German and half in English, shot between Luxembourg, Germany and the Canary Islands, and I'm very very curious as to how it'll turn out! This is the logline:

groundbreaking brain surgery in a clinic in Lanzarote may be Maret's only hope to get her memory back. The problem is – does she really want to remember the person she once was?

*"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."*