

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA BÄCK



Maria Bäck © Ola Kjelbye

**DIRECTOR OF “PSYCHOSIS IN STOCKHOLM”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**
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BY KARIN SCHIEFER

YOUR FIRST FEATURE FILM “PSYCHOSIS IN STOCKHOLM” IS BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. IN A SHORT STATEMENT YOU WROTE THAT YOU REMEMBERED ONLY FRAGMENTS OF THESE DAYS IN STOCKHOLM THAT WERE MEANT TO CELEBRATE YOUR 14TH BIRTHDAY. DO YOU THINK THE WISH TO MAKE THIS FILM WAS LINKED TO THE DESIRE TO FILL THE GAP BETWEEN THE PIECES OF MEMORY, OR WERE YOU PROMPTED MORE BY THE IDEA OF FINDING A PLAYFUL AND FICTITIOUS WAY OF DEALING WITH IT?

I don't think that I wanted to fill gaps, but I definitely wanted to play and work in a field of modified memories. In a way, the working process already started when I was on that vacation, since I experienced it as if I was part of a film. Everything was so weird. The story of “Psychosis in Stockholm” has been inside me ever since as something that always stimulated my imagination and as something I've always wanted to see mirrored in a film.

HOW MUCH WEIGHT DID YOU PUT ON THE FICTITIOUS ELEMENTS COMPARED TO YOUR REAL MEMORIES?

The film is heavily inspired by my own childhood and life with my mum. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and has had manic and psychotic episodes since I was five. This inspired my whole life and work.

I feel that everything is true in the film, even though not everything happened the way it is told in the film. Facts and fiction have a tendency to blur for me, in both my documentary and fiction projects. My focus is first and foremost on the piece. There is a precise presence I'm trying to grasp. The film becomes a friend with needs and desires. I guess fiction and memories are very close to each other. I don't think the autobiographical story is something that you find and analyse until you are “done”, or that there is a right answer to anything. My belief is more that your past is something you constantly relate to and in many ways reinvent, that you somehow construct it again and again in some sort of tension between the authentic and the staged. So in that sense my past is not really about me, but about universal aspects of being a human under particular circumstances that I happen to know something about and am therefore able to share.

YOU SAID THAT YOU LET YOURSELF PURSUE A THEME THAT HAS BECOME VERY STRONG INSIDE YOURSELF. HOW SHOULD WE PICTURE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT, ESPECIALLY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NARRATION?

At the beginning of this process my mum gave me access



"Psychosis in Stockholm" © Nadim Carlsen

to her complete medical journals dating back 40 years, which meant about 500 pages from a secret world. That was really touching to read. I used it as inspiration together with my own old diaries and poems and started elaborating on the film's universe and characters. I was interested in portraying a nuanced picture of both the mother and daughter in this type of situation. There are so many strange expectations of how things that make us unhappy are supposed to be. I also knew from the start that I wanted to make the film as an adventure!

I was of course in close dialogue from the very beginning with my dear producer Anna-Maria Kantarius. I think what matters most to me in a process is the people I collaborate with. I feel we are family in a way and I am fortunate enough to work with a lot of regulars, such as cinematographer Maria von Hausswolff, sound designer Anne Gry Friis Kristensen and editor Julius Krebs Damsbo, who in many ways are a part of me and whose ideas affect the films from the very beginning.

This time I also started some new engaging partnerships. Among others I started a new partnership with the dop Nadim Carlsen and I had the pleasure of collaborating with Eskil Vogt, the director and screenwriter, as a script consultant right from a very early phase of the project. I also started working with Lars Greve, who is a Danish saxophonist, clarinetist and composer, in this initial phase. We began trying out different themes and methods that could colour the scenes while I was still writing the script.

In parallel with writing we were engaged in a long casting process, where I collaborated with the casting director Archana Khanna. Since it was my first time working with actors, I became very closely involved in this process and used it as a tool to understand the characters of the film and to build them. It was important not to reduce either mother or daughter

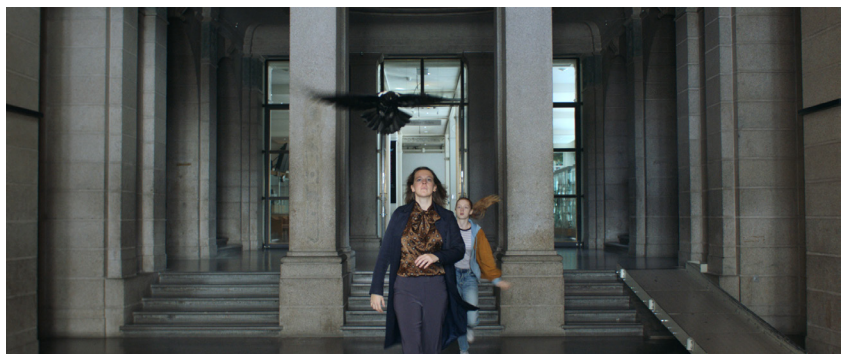
to the status of a victim, which would have destroyed everything. The crucial point was to find actors to represent a daughter and her mother who were able to create a loving relationship that I could believe in.

WHAT LED YOU EVENTUALLY TO THE DECISION TO WORK WITH JOSEFINE STOFKOPER AND JOSEFIN NELDÉN – WHAT A FUNNY COINCIDENCE THAT THEY HAVE THE SAME CHRISTIAN NAME?

That was a sign for sure! Double J definitely stands for magic to me. I have something with that letter in general. We auditioned almost 150 girls before we found Josefine Stofkoper, and I fell for her at first sight. She just looked at me and I knew she was the one. I also immediately felt strongly connected to Neldén. She brought a sort of pride and clarity into the character that was very important to this specific role from the very beginning. Before I could take any decision though, we had to see how both of them were able to work together and create what we needed. My heart was beating extra hard that day.

YOU START YOUR NARRATION WITH A SEQUENCE THAT COULD BE A FLASHBACK: A YOUNG WOMAN GETTING ON THE TRAIN ON HER OWN, MAYBE REMEMBERING A JOURNEY WHEN SHE WAS YOUNGER. THE LAST IMAGES CLOSE THE LOOP WITH IMAGES OF THE 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL TAKING A TRAIN THAT REMINDS US OF THE ONE AT THE BEGINNING. THERE SEEMS TO BE A SUSPENSION OF TIME, SOMETHING IN THE PRESENT AND THE PAST AT THE SAME TIME. WAS THAT SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO PLAY WITH?

That's exactly it. I love playing with different layers of time. It is definitely past and present and future at the same time. And the prologue and the epilogue might give a hint of how strong this bond



"Psychosis in Stockholm" © Nadim Carlsen



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is between the mother and her daughter. The film stretches time out, instead of focusing exclusively on an isolated aspect of this short vacation. In the beginning and the end you can hear my voice and that of my mum. I wanted the heart of the story to be part of the body of the film. I wanted to include my mum as a homage to her and as a homage to her life.

THE EMOTIONS THAT THIS 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL APPARENTLY HAS TO GO THROUGH ARE MORE THAN AMBIVALENT. THEY RANGE FROM LOVE AND JOY, SHAME, DECEPTION TO HELPLESSNESS AND ANGER – AND AT THE SAME TIME SHE’S IN A WAY COMING OF AGE WITHIN 48 HOURS, DISCOVERING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FREE AND ON ONE’S OWN AND PROVING TO BE FEARLESS, WISE AND CURIOUS. ABOVE ALL “PSYCHOSIS IN STOCKHOLM” IS A STORY OF IMMENSE SOLITUDE. HOW DID YOU TRY TO GIVE SPACE TO THIS WIDE RANGE OF FEELINGS? HOW DID YOU WORK ON THEM WITH JOSEFINE?

I agree with you about this wide range of feelings. Josefine Stofkoper did an amazing job. I felt we understood each other on a soul to soul level. She was passionate and really dedicated herself to portraying the daughter, which was impressive at such a young age. She needed to engage very intensely, since the film is so much about being present and being able to encapsulate all sorts of feelings without having the opportunity to live them out.

She had to cope with this accumulation of different feelings and the daughter’s need to navigate in chaos and find pleasure inside the chaos. In life it’s not a question of choice between pain or pleasure, ugliness or beauty. You always move along inside both at the same time. I wanted to express her dilemma: on the one hand she wants to be found, while on the other hand she wants

people to leave her alone, which leads to a very specific loneliness. She encounters a solitude in which she experiences life as extra intense. It’s extremely difficult for the daughter to share what she is going through. How do you do that in a way that makes sense in this challenging situation that nobody is really able to understand? Another very tricky aspect is the feeling of shame experienced by children of parents with a mental condition.

You can feel the social shame surrounding the illness. So as a child you learn very early to protect your mum or dad from that shame and keep the situation a secret. Children are very loyal and good at adjusting to it.

Josefine and I worked a lot on all these feelings, together with Josefin Neldén, playing the mother, of course. The three of us became close and had a very good time together. I think the key was trust and humour, for all of us to feel safe and dare to take risks. Josefine stayed in Stockholm for the whole period we were shooting. She was away from school and friends and lived through an adventure while making the film. As a matter of fact she experienced several things for the first time when we were shooting. She tasted vodka for the first time and went down an escalator to the subway for the first time, to mention a few documentary moments! Experiencing Stockholm through her eyes, since she actually didn’t know the city beforehand and normally lives in the countryside, obliged us as a team to stay as open as her. I loved catching these moments together with cinematographer Nadim Carlsen. We went to film school together and I enjoyed every minute together with him on the set. He’s as steady as a rock with a sharp and sensitive eye, and he’s very warm-hearted.

YOU USE MANY DIFFERENT MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION IN YOUR FILM: THE TRAIN, THE SUBWAY, THE TAXI, THE AIRPORT, A BOAT, A BIKE. HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE ROLE PLAYED BY MOTION IN YOUR CONCEPT?



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Extremely significant. Movement is a very essential point, both in terms of bodies and light and as small detail that shows motion on different levels. In the beginning of our work with the actresses we didn't even talk, they were just bodies in motion. And as you say, the concept is also about moving in different kinds of shapes inside the film, such as means of transportation. I enjoyed very much playing with natural locations that we all know and have memories from. Filming on location really gave a lot to this project. We even chose to include some of the real locations from the actual vacation. I love the combination of the controlled and the uncontrolled. Coming from a documentary background I'm used to taking advantage of the gifts you can get from reality, such as sudden changing weather or people walking funnily in the background. In a fiction film it is generally more difficult to include these things; everything needs to be planned within a time schedule, with lots of big cars and people and food breaks and traffic jams and stuff. I did my best to add unknown factors though, and on top of that we worked almost exclusively with natural light. When we shot the scene on the train we desperately needed sunshine, and given the fact that these were the most expensive scenes in my whole career, I concentrated on not getting nervous. The funny thing is, if you really work hard on every detail and make sure that you've done your best, the weather ends up adding what the film needs. You just need to trust that.

TALKING ABOUT LIGHT LEADS US TO THE QUESTION OF CAMERA WORK. I SUPPOSE THAT YOU CELEBRATED YOUR 14TH BIRTHDAY BEFORE THE SMARTPHONE ERA. WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO USE MOBILE PHONE IMAGES, WHICH ADD AN IMPROVISED, CASUAL AND SOMEHOW “UNPROFESSIONAL” ASPECT TO THE SCENES?

It seemed to be the appropriate tool for the girl to stay in touch with her mum after she'd been confined in the

psychiatric ward; it grew naturally from the characters and became a way of giving the mother presence in her daughter's life. It also felt natural to work intuitively with some of the material and actually be able to capture some of the footage totally unplanned on the go. I loved that freedom and how it came to include different time aspects and realities in the material. I very much enjoy the way cinema can blend expressions, times, moods and associations in all sorts of ways that bypass our intellect.

IN THE END YOU SWITCH TO A BIRD'S PERSPECTIVE INTRODUCING A STEP INTO FREEDOM AND OUT OF REALITY, DEMONSTRATING A FORM OF DETACHMENT. YOUR BIRD IS A RAVEN, WHICH IS ALSO A SYMBOL WITH DARK CONNOTATIONS. WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS REGARDING THESE IMAGES?

The raven is not a symbol per se; instead it's related to the mother's world, since she has this fantasy about the birds being her soldiers. You don't really know whether it's a good or a bad bird, and I like this ambiguous moment and the fact that the daughter is playing along in a way. Maybe it's a bird from another time or another place in time.

HOW DID YOU EXPERIENCE THE SHIFT FROM DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING TO SOMETHING FICTIONAL, EVEN THOUGH THERE'S AN AUTHENTIC AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND?

As a film director you always work with a vision and the aim of grasping the right material in order to make your vision alive. In a way I didn't feel a big difference. There was a huge distinction with regard to the amount of planning and people involved though, but I'm sure you can do both fiction and documentary in all sorts of ways. And I'm very much looking forward to doing so! I will always try to listen to each project's heart and follow that. And I will always try to be brave. That is the most important thing when making films, I think.

“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.”