

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA SØDAHL



Maria Sødahl © Motlys by Agnete Brun

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA SØDAHL
DIRECTOR OF “HOPE”
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES

DECEMBER 2018

BY TARA KARAJICA

Maria Sødahl graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 1993. Before this, she made her first short film, Life Is Hard and Then You Die in 1989. During her studies, Sødahl worked as a casting director on feature films such as Nils Gaup's "Shipwrecked" (1990), "Lethal Lies" by Martin Asphaug (1992) and the "Last Lieutenant" by Hans Petter Moland (1992). She has written and directed several television dramas, documentaries and short films. For the short film series "Love & Hate – European Stories" (1995), a feature collaboration with European countries, Sødahl directed the film "Sara" in 20 minutes. It secured her the Jury's Special Award at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in 1995. With the episode film "The 7 Deadly Sins" (2000), the Norwegian Film Institute invited seven directors to interpret each of the seven deadly sins in their own way. Her part was Wrath. Sødahl made her debut as a feature film director with "Limbo" (2010) with her own script. Limbo was first shown as the opening film at the 2010 Norwegian International Film Festival – Haugesund. The film received rave reviews and a total of five Amanda Awards out of a total of 10 nominations. Sødahl also received the Award for Best Director at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2010.

Maria Sødahl is now prepping her second feature film, "Hope", and talks to Tara Karajica about it and the situation of women in film today.

THE STORY OF “HOPE” IS BASED ON YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES. HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

Seven years ago, when I received a terminal cancer diagnosis, the idea of movie-making vanished in a second. Two years later, still alive but frail after the challenging medical story, I was offered the opportunity to direct an international feature. To do a major production was, at the time, way too premature, but it awakened my urge to tell stories again. Almost against my own will, I ended up writing my most autobiographical project ever. There was no way around it. Finally, it took me two years to have a script which I could present and nine years will have passed between my first and second film, due to premiere Christmas 2019.

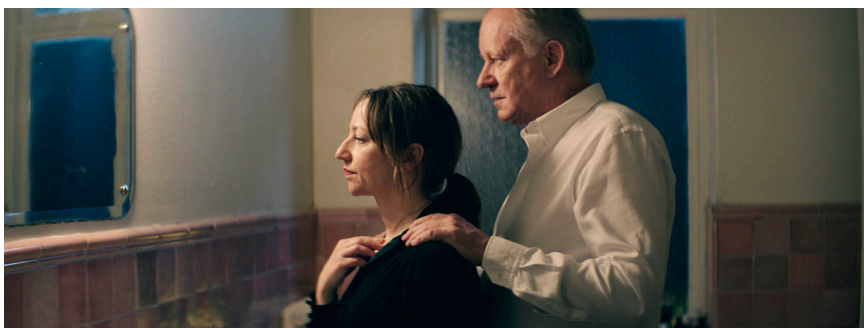


“Hope” © Motlys by Manuel Claro

IN YOUR PRODUCTION NOTES, YOU STATE THAT THIS STORY NEEDS TO BE EXPERIENCED, THAT YOU WANT THEMES AND CHARACTERS TO REVOLVE AROUND ISSUES THAT CHALLENGE THE VIEWERS’ PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR OWN LIVES, BUT ALSO THAT THE FILM SHOULD PRIMARILY BE EXPERIENCED WITH THE GUT. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

By exploring a personal experience, I examine a couple’s long life together through one brief Christmas week. What can happen to love when you, in the middle of your life, are told you have three months left to live? In my process of writing, very raw and naked scenes inevitably occurred, situations that make it difficult to stay indifferent, material which fascinated and kept my curiosity going. The major challenge has been balancing between sharing material so private that I hardly dared to reveal it to myself and achieving the telling of a story that became personal as opposed to private. I believe it is an ideal to let people into a world where they can identify with actions and emotions that are not always flattering, without becoming ashamed.

I’ve also reflected on how we experience stories with our heart, intellect and body, and I believe this film will be experienced primarily with the gut, that you will get physically exhausted by watching it. The uncertainty and emotional turbulence leaves little room for rest.



“Hope” © Motlys by Manuel Claro

As a result, the audience will not be left in peace, but will be hopefully be given a wake-up call, a golden opportunity to reflect on choices they make in their own lives.

HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO DISTANCE YOURSELF – YOU BEING THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A WAY – FROM THE STORY THAT COMES FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE, IF AT ALL?

Although the story is told from my own perspective, getting permission from my close family to deal with our common history was crucial in the process. In short, I had long talks with my husband and, later on, individual lunches “interviewing” each of my three biological and three step-children. Primarily, my question was how they remembered me from this particular week. Being strongly medicated on steroids combined with survival



“Hope” © Motlys by Manuel Claro

urges – they presented “various portraits” of my character. As result, I not only got to see myself through their eyes (aged 10-26 years old), but also saw the mechanisms of a modern family. Without doubt, their contributions helped me to get the necessary distance to build a fictional character. Besides, casting the talented actress Andrea Bræin Hovig will ensure that the main character will have a life of her own.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE TITLE?

“Hope” as a title is both nothing and everything. Being dangerously close to the banal, most people might suggest the title relates to the medical story – whether she will survive or not. But after having watched the film, they will see it obviously relates to whether she is capable of loving or not. I like this ambiguity which emphasises the story’s parallel themes.

YOU ASK AGAIN IN THE PRODUCTION NOTES WHAT HAPPENS TO LOVE WHEN A WOMAN IN THE MIDDLE OF HER LIFE RECEIVES THE NEWS THAT SHE HAS BEEN GIVEN THREE MONTHS TO LIVE. HOW DO YOU PLAN TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION WITH YOUR FILM? OR, DO YOU ACTUALLY HAVE THE ANSWER?

The film is my answer, so you'll have to buy a ticket!

YOU TELL A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE STORY AND, AS YOU HAVE JUST SAID, IT'S NOT A MATTER OF WHETHER SHE LIVES OR NOT, BUT HOW, WITH THAT OVERHANGING THREAT, HER ABILITY TO LOVE AND BE LOVED CHANGES. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT? HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT IN THE STORY?

In danger of repeating myself, I realised that through experiencing a death threat I got a second chance to learn about love. It just happened. A crash course I suppose, where the characters themselves are unaware that they are becoming part of a love story.

WHAT WILL THE AESTHETIC AND THE TONE OF THE FILM BE LIKE?

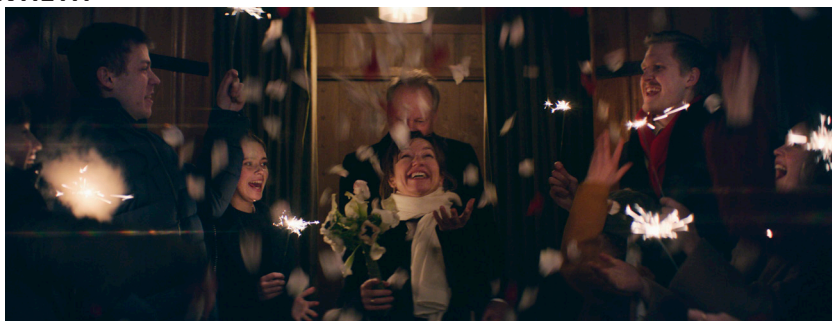
I picture quite a raw and, in many ways, naturalistic style, where beauty lies more in the human factor, rather than in the aesthetics. The tone, I guess, will be determined by a mixture of human inadequacy, existential chaos, absurd humour, as well as grief over a lost future. The centre and heart of the film is in the family home, contrasted with car scenes between various hospitals in cold winter light, like in a road-movie. The camera will mostly be operated hand-held, freely following the main characters' moves and changes in their state of mind. Her subjective point of view through the story will be accentuated by a subtle stylisation of the sound design.

WILL THE EDITING FOLLOW THIS TEMPO AND HER UNPREDICTABILITY?

Yes. The storytelling needs to be organic on all levels. The characters will dictate so much of the camerawork and consequently the editing.

THE PRODUCTION COMPANIES, THE ACTORS AND THE CREW YOU ARE WORKING WITH ON THIS FILM ARE BIG NAMES IN EUROPEAN CINEMA. HOW DID YOU GET ALL OF THEM TOGETHER FOR YOUR FILM?

Composer Johan Söderqvist and cinematographer Manuel Alberto Claro are both continuous collaborators from my first feature, "Limbo". As far as Stellan Skarsgård is concerned, he is both a friend and a great actor who luckily found the script exciting. It is inspiring that an experienced actor like him finds it intriguing joining a mixed cast of both professionals and amateurs – children and actual doctors in the story's health staff. As a director, I also find this combination both risky and exciting.



"Hope" © Motlys by Manuel Claro

WOMEN IN FILM HAS BEEN A HOT TOPIC FOR THE PAST YEAR. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE SITUATION? HOW IS IT IN NORWAY?

It's a complex subject. On the other hand, it's all quite simple. In Norway, where the film industry is subsidised mainly by the government, our tax money ideally should represent our society both in front and behind the camera. One should experience art reflecting our lives in all its shapes, ages and colours, not only gender equality. To me, these are timeless values to strive for. That said, as a woman in film, I will never stop challenging myself and fellow female filmmakers to show our ultimate courage when telling our stories, both artistically and thematically. We need to conquer a still dominant male film business and support soft gender quotas.